



P. M. Friesen & his History

Understanding Mennonite Brethren Beginnings.



Edited by Abraham Friesen

**PERSPECTIVES ON
MENNONITE LIFE AND THOUGHT**

NO. 2

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**Center for Mennonite Brethren Studies
Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary
Fresno, California**



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Introduction

Until relatively recently not many historians, either sacred or profane, have emerged from within the ranks of the Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition. The 'splendid isolation' of such volumes as the *Hutterite Chronicle* and the *Martyrs' Mirror* only serve to accentuate this fact. Aside from the American Mennonites associated primarily with Goshen College and its affiliated Biblical Seminary in more recent years, only the Dutch Mennonites have a historical tradition of some note. Among the Mennonite Brethren there is — leaving the present generation out of consideration — only one historian worthy of the name: the teacher-theologian Peter Martin Friesen. He was a man of one book, a book twenty-five years in the making. That book was commissioned soon after the birth of the movement and, when it appeared, fulfilled much the same function as the other two mentioned above: it was an attempt to explain and justify a new Mennonite church as well as to recount the stories of its 'martyrs'. Yet there is a difference. The first two were attempts to justify the Anabaptist-Mennonite movement against the aspersion of the enemy without; Friesen's study wished to justify the existence of the Mennonite Brethren Church to the enemy within — the larger Mennonite society in Russia from which it emerged.

When Friesen completed the book in 1911 he had no way of knowing what the future held in store for the Mennonites of Russia. He could not know that the Russian Revolution — a mere six years away — together with the subsequent Mennonite emigration and the closing of the Russian archives to Western scholars (hiding what documentary evidence had not been destroyed during the revolutionary turmoil and subsequent dislocation of thousands of Mennonites) would place his book in a unique position. For while the *Hutterite Chronicle* and the *Martyrs' Mirror* have, over the years, been supplemented with the volumes of the *Quellen zur Geschichte der Täufer* as well as other collections of source materials and a growing number of scholarly monographs based upon

archival research in Europe, the corrections and further studies that Friesen himself called for in the introduction to his history have been made very difficult, if not completely impossible. Thus all studies of the Russian Mennonites — and especially those relating to the Mennonite Brethren — must rely heavily on Friesen.

Having said this, one feels compelled to ask why the break with the larger Mennonite community in Russia did not evoke a counter-response to Friesen, indeed, why so few people have concerned themselves with the study of the event at all. It is even doubtful that Friesen would have written on the subject had he not initially been commissioned to do so by the fledgling M B Church. Have Mennonites, until the very recent past, not been interested in their own history? Have they perhaps been afraid to look at that past for fear that it might rattle some of their pet assumptions about themselves? Friesen thought so. And so does David Rempel, the best contemporary authority on the Mennonite experience in Russia, who remarked in a letter to the editor of this volume: "My general acquaintanceship with Russian Mennonite writings on any important aspect of their long sojourn in that empire, and my experience in practice with different groups of members of our brotherhood on somewhat controversial issues of our life in that country, have unfortunately led me to the conclusion that too many of our people prefer to hear or to read about that experience not so much as the event actually occurred but as they wished to have it happen."

Aside from this desire to believe, perhaps even determination to believe, pious myths about our past rather than confront the real story, there is one other reason for this phenomenon that comes to mind. With the exception of those who, like the Dutch, have remained in the land of their birth, Mennonites have, nearly the world over, been a pilgrim people in search of the promised land. This is especially true of those who left the Netherlands for Prussia and Poland during the years of persecution following the Reformation. Concerned primarily to protect life and limb by avoiding the snare of the heresy hunter — and in the process eke out an existence — they hardly had either the time or the opportunity, never mind the interest, to reflect,

profoundly or otherwise, upon the meaning of their pilgrimage. Never far removed from persecution during the first two hundred years of their existence, they kept a low profile and eventually came to be known as the 'quiet in the land', a description we used to be proud of. And because they were not overly eager to be educated in the schools of their persecutors, they developed an antipathy toward education generally and tended, unlike the leaders of the original movement, not to produce educated leaders.

In 1789 these Mennonites began all over again, this time in Russia. They repeated that experience in Canada and the United States in the 1870s, the 1920s and the 1940s. Still others have repeated it in South America and more recently in Germany. There was thus little leisure in between to develop a strong sense of historical continuity when discontinuity and hardship appeared to be the order of the day. Nevertheless, the Russian Mennonites did develop their own school system from which, in the second half of the nineteenth century, a number of exceptional students emerged who continued their studies abroad, either in the universities of Germany or Switzerland. However, the Russian Mennonite schools, to which these students more often than not returned to teach after their stay abroad, usually served practical rather than philosophical ends. Under these conditions, had the M B Church not commissioned Friesen to write his history not even he would have shouldered the task. Given the intellectual climate among the Russian Mennonites, then, Friesen's study is all the more remarkable, written as it was under very adverse conditions.

Initially, Friesen was concerned — as were those who commissioned the study — to trace the origins and growth of the M B Church. As the project grew, however, he broadened the scope of his study to include the whole of Russian Mennonitism. Even so, the original preoccupation with origins remained a primary focus. For the historian, the search for origins is always problematical, for it tends to give him tunnel vision. Much as the sands in an hourglass must filter through a narrow passageway in order to measure time, the search for origins all too often becomes the focus of the study through which every other event is

seen. Neither the history before nor the history after that event is seen on its own terms. Such a search can, and in P.M. Friesen does, have a distorting effect upon the interpretation of the evidence.

The essays included in this volume were originally written for and presented at the P.M. Friesen Symposium held in Fresno on May 4-6, 1978, under the auspices of the Center for Mennonite Brethren Studies and the Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary to mark the publication of the translation of Friesen's history. They therefore quite naturally center around that work and the issues mentioned above: the setting of the historical events in Russia; the problem of origins; some of the salient issues raised by the book; and the historian himself. The first section was originally to have contained two essays: one by John B. Toews of Calgary on the Mennonite intellectual world from which the M B Church and P.M. Friesen both emerged; the second by David Rempel on the influence of economic and social structures on the religious life of the Russian Mennonites between 1840 and 1870. Without looking at the problem of origins directly, they were to set the stage for the events that transpired during those crucial thirty years. But due to ill health, Professor Rempel was subsequently unable to prepare and present his paper. The symposium was, and this volume is, the poorer for it, especially in light of the lengthy letter sent by Professor Rempel to the editor accepting the assignment and laying out *in extenso* his preliminary views on the topic.

The second group of essays deals with kinship patterns and leadership among the founding fathers of the M.B. Church and raises some intriguing questions. Based on the extensive genealogical research of Alan Peters, the first essay calls us to consider an aspect of the origins of the M.B. Church seldom if ever broached before, and certainly not given any consideration by Friesen. The second essay deals with Johann Claassen, without a doubt the most important single personality amongst the founding fathers. Based upon a book by the same name just recently published, this short biographical sketch reminds us of the importance of individuals in the birth of any movement, but especially in that of the early M.B. Church.

The third section is devoted to Friesen the historian as well as more directly to one of the central issues raised by his study: the question of the origins of the Mennonite Brethren Church. Needless to say, every historian, no matter how hard he attempts to remain objective, or as Friesen put it, "to write truth as the Bible did of David", puts a little of himself into his work. These essays, therefore, seek to help us understand Friesen's history better by illuminating the man and his presupposition, his style and the problems he confronted as well as the central issue he dealt with.

In the final part the authors attempt to use Friesen to help us understand ourselves better in the present. The first essay centers around the problem of language, specifically the linguistic accommodation or non-accommodation of a peregrinating minority group to the dominant language-culture of the country in which they live. The second has to do with the importance of Friesen's history for our theological self-understanding, clearly the most important issue of all. Indeed, in one way or another, all of the essays are concerned with this problem; J.B. Toews' essay, however, more specifically than all the others. And it is only fitting that he should have the last word in this book. After all, he was the moving force behind both the translation and the symposium.

The purpose of this book, then, as that of the translation of Friesen's history which preceded it, is to help us become more aware of our heritage, indeed, to awaken within each one of us historical consciousness. We are not a people living in a vacuum; we are historical beings, whether we like it or not. And if we truly believe — as we profess on many occasions — that God has been at work in our history, should we not be much more concerned to know it the way it really happened — as much as that is possible — than we are at present? For our continuing disregard of that history is clearer testimony than we care to admit that we do not really believe that it has any meaning at all.

Abraham Friesen
 Santa Barbara, California
 January, 1979

THE RUSSIAN MENNONITE INTELLECT OF THE NINETEENTH CENTURY *

John B. Toews

Our knowledge of the Russian Mennonite experience is largely ecclesiastical, administrative, and economic in character. This situation not only reflects the kind of records which were kept, but the documents which historians in Russia selected and published. In the absence of any major archival rediscovery, books like Peter M. Friesen's *Die Alt-Evangelische Mennonitische Bruederschaft in Russland, 1789-1910* (Halbstadt, Taurien, 1911) and Franz Isaak's *Die Molotschnaer Mennoniten* (Halbstadt, Taurien, 1908), continue to provide the major documentary undergirding for any study of the subject. Unfortunately, the printed sources relating to cultural intellectual dimensions are sporadic and few, especially for the first half of the nineteenth century: what did the Russian Mennonite know about theology, literature, history, philosophy, or art? How did he acquire and sustain such knowledge? Where did such learning lead him? Such questions can illuminate the cultural intellectual aspirations of the Russian Mennonite and provide some insight into the quality of his intellect as well. Yet adequate explanations are difficult to supply and there is a constant temptation to speculate where sources are scarce, the desire to overstate where sources are more abundant.

Initially the Russian Mennonites were a wandering people settling on a new frontier. In their exodus from Prussia, they often left the accumulated wisdom of past decades behind. Their men of learning instinctively sensed that an established economy of wide-spread literacy better ensured cultural continuity in a new land where questions other than survival appeared peripheral. They knew that the practice of their art was not an acceptable option on the

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expansive Russian steppe. They could not expose their modest treasure to the cross winds of a new language and new culture. The intellectual had too much to lose. There was no niche for him in the villages of that harsh frontier and so he remained in Prussia. Thus, the first colonists arrived in Chortitza with only fragments of their intellectual legacy, and for decades these pieces lay scattered. No one had the ability to reconstruct the mosaic and to reshape the missing pieces. An occasional teacher left Prussia with the intent of providing enlightenment, but he lived in only one village and that for only a few years. Relief for the Russian Mennonite cultural plight only began some four decades after the initial settlement, possibly with the mass migration of the Gnadenfeld congregation from Prussia in 1835. Until then, the elder functioned as virtually the only generative force in matters of religion and intellect.

The Elder as Custodian of Intellect

The status of the elder in the Prussian Mennonite communities of late eighteenth century was clearly defined. He was the chief religious authority in matters of faith, morals, worship and special ceremony. His role was regarded as primarily spiritual in character, even though his moral jurisdiction endowed him with a type of civic authority. In most instances he was the cultural and intellectual leader of the community by virtue of his superior training. For example, when the Prussian elder Cornelius Warkentin visited the Chortitza Mennonites in 1794 to help them organize their religious life, his broad learning earned him the respect of "Catholic and Lutheran clergymen, imperial Russian colonial officials, governors and prominent personalities. . . ."¹ The first Prussian Mennonites arriving in Chortitza imported little or none of this talent. In stark contrast to Warkentin, many of the early Russian Mennonite "Ohms" (elders) were spiritually and intellectually impoverished and unable to fulfill their responsibilities. These were men who, aware of their impotence, "broke out in sighs and tears and also caused their hearers to cry."²

There appears to have been little improvement during the first three decades of the nineteenth century. Jacob

Enns' quarrels with Klaas Wiens (Steinbach) and Klaas Reimer (Kleine Gemeinde) were hardly the dialogue of gentlemen nor were they even sustained by theological debate of merit. Reimer, his zeal as a moral reformer notwithstanding, "considered the reading of books published by people of other faiths to be a sign of apostasy."³ He need not have worried unduly: very few people were reading books on the new frontier. Many outside of the *Kleine Gemeinde* likewise resisted any expansion of the Mennonite mind. A moderate elder like Bernhard Fast (1821-1860) proved too progressive when he supported the founding of an advanced school and a Bible society. The forbearance of his parishoners reached a breaking point when he admitted a visiting missionary to communion: three-quarters of his Flemish congregation left him (1822-24). For a time Fast's small congregation in Orloff, aided by the Rudnerweide and Alexanderwohl congregations, functioned as an island of culture and spirituality in the Molochnaya settlement.

Fortunately, help was on the way. In the Brandenburg village of Brenkenhofswalde a talented Lutheran family named Lange joined the local Mennonite congregation. A son, Wilhelm, was ordained a Mennonite elder by 1810. His intellectual and religious interests ranged well beyond those of a "certified teacher." Especially noteworthy was his dialogue with the Moravians of the region, Gottlieb Jahr in particular. When P.M. Friesen studied two confessions of faith used in Brenkenhofswalde and copied by Wilhelm Lange in 1812 and 1815, he was "astounded at the theological training and broad classic religious insights which these simple farmer-bishops . . . developed."⁴ In 1835 Lange, together with some forty families, migrated to the Molochnaya settlement where they founded Gnadenfeld, a village soon known for its interest in Bible study, missions, and prayer meetings. Apparently their spirituality was not welcome in the colony—nicknames like "fanatics" and "goody-goodys" were hardly intended as compliments.⁵

The settlers not only brought piety and literacy, but new blood as well—Rabe, Rabsch, Lenzmann, Strauss, Klatt.⁶ Lutherans, liberally adulterated by Moravian and Prussian Mennonite influence, potentially provided a

cultural and spiritual redemption for the Russian Mennonites. The Gnadenfeld influence, disseminated through church and school, dominated the Molochnaya for more than a decade. Though Wilhelm Lange's successor, a younger relative named Friedrich W. Lange (1841-49), exercised an even greater influence "than that of his predecessor,"⁷ the "foreign culture" was not destined to last. Both it and its representatives were unceremoniously deposed when scandalous rumors involving Friedrich led to his resignation in 1849 and the deposition of those who defended his integrity. Why a progressive like Bernhard Fast figured as an opponent of Lange is difficult to explain. Perhaps Fast acted with characteristic impetuosity or resented the influential roles played by the "foreigners."

Locally, Gnadenfeld "culture" suffered after the departure of Friedrich Lange; but in a broader sense the "Lutheran enlightenment" lived on, both in the teachers and spiritual seekers it produced. The sins which Bernhard Fast and his fellow Mennonites committed against the ex-Lutherans were happily not laid to their charge. While the Molochnaya experienced a cultural leveling off during the next decade, the intellectual attrition which so plagued the early settlement was overcome.

Until the mid-nineteenth century, Mennonite elders displayed considerable variation in their respective endowments. Conservatives and moderates lived side by side, but as far as the constituency was concerned, a conservative majority demanded leaders who maintained the status quo. Although innovative ideas gradually spread to wider audiences between 1840 and 1860, their advocates remained a minority. In the 1870s the views of conservative Mennonite elders still figured prominently in the mass migration to America. Whether conservative or moderate, Mennonite elders produced virtually no theological or edifying literature prior to 1860. Even exceptional elders like Bernhard Fast and Friedrich Lange failed to engage in widespread literacy activity. An interesting exception is Heinrich Balzer, the *Klein Gemeinde* elder whose 1833 tract *Verstand und Vernunft* (Understanding and Reason) appears both sophisticated and preceptive. Balzer focuses upon the growing complexity of Mennonite life in Russia

and the outside influences altering its traditional life style. Material improvement and the expansion of intellect, he asserted, did not increase man's knowledge of God. Instead, everywhere there was evidence of "pride, ostentation, vanity, greed for money, lust for wealth, avarice, drunkenness, luxury, vicious life, masquarades, obscene songs, gambling, and above all the miserable smoking of tobacco . . ." ⁸ The tract, while displaying considerable mastery of German prose, is reactionary—Balzer is incapable of appreciating the expanding Mennonite world. His appeal is to the past, and intellect, though of high quality, assumes an ultra-conservative stance. He possibly symbolized the Mennonite mind of the mid-nineteenth century—certainly not illiterate, but incapable of adapting a historic faith to new circumstances.

The Mennonite elder's potential for intellectual leadership was not only undermined by his own and the constituency's conservatism, but by a socio-economic development as well. The rapid material advance after 1840 directly affected many elders, for as landowners they were an intergral part of that growing prosperity. The religious leader of the community was now socially and economically identified with its wealthier segment. In part he was the victim of a historical process. During earlier centuries his dissenting forefathers separated the Mennonites from the rest of society. Once apart Mennonite religion and politics inevitably intermingled. Both in Prussia and Russia a highly functional marriage of church and state was consummated, but its happiness depended on the status quo. A Mennonite leader whether elder or mayor, knew instinctively that excessive self-assertion by either the political or religious component of the community brought disaster. By the mid-nineteenth century wealth in the form of land holdings and cash reserves from the sale of agricultural products united elder and mayor. Both benefitted from the existing system, and if they wished to derive maximum influence from their positions, conservative and reactionary policies were in order.

As a result, the Mennonite elder of 1850, with some exceptions, was a man of the establishment. He upheld a historic position in the Mennonite community which not

only supervised ethics and morals but ostracized unrepentant transgressors from that community. By and large his instincts were administrative and legal in character, not visionary or creative. The emergence of the Brethren in the early 1860s effectively demonstrated the reactionary character of some of the elders as does a cursory study of the emigration leaders of the 1870s.

Adolf Ehrt in his *Das Mennonitentum in Russland* speaks of a "Herrschaft der Wirte" (rule of the landowners) in the economic world of 1850.⁹ The formation of a *Kirchenkonvent* (Council of Elders) prior to 1850 created an ecclesiastical counterpart to the power exercised by the landowners. The elders, without the consent of the community at large, made the *Kirchenkonvent* the highest authority in all religious matters. In the hierarchy which resulted, the elders soon found themselves subjected to the Mennonite state. More and more the "keeping of the peace" meant that the elders condoned the actions of the state. They were no longer free spokesmen for their own cause. In 1846 elder Heinrich Wiens of Margenau excommunicated several of his members whom the local mayor ordered to assist in the corporal punishment of a youth. When the head of the Supervisory Commission in Odessa, Eduard von Hahn, visited Halbstadt on July 20th he curtly reminded Wiens that he was only a farmer and as such "subject to the mayor and also not exempt from corporal punishment."¹⁰ Hahn expected the other elders to respect civic authority and deal appropriately with Wiens. In a letter to Molochnaya officials on August 4, 1846, Hahn again observed that every citizen must "obey the authorities appointed by the government."¹¹ In the end, the elders succumbed to Hahn's pressure and deposed Wiens.

By now there were at least three precedents for dealing with religious nonconformity. Hahn's captious deposition of elders Jacob Warkentin (1842) and Peter Schmidt (1844) already symbolized the progressive subjection of the elders to civil authorities. For at least two decades the Mennonite elders co-operated with the political segment of the community. When volost chairman David Friesen requested information about the Brethren dissenters in 1869, the elders reflected the Mennonite state when they observed that

"...disorders could emerge if they continue as a free and new religious fellowship."¹² Neither group seemed to understand that it was imprisoned by its own system and that affairs in both church and state were reaching totalitarian proportions. By their union with state, the elders not only made themselves obsolete but suppressed religious inquiry. The majority remained steadfast opponents of renewal, the very element capable of freeing them from the tyranny of the state and restoring them to a position of spiritual and intellectual leadership.

The Teacher as Intellectual Servant

By the mid-nineteenth century it was clear that the Mennonite elder was incapable of significantly broadening the intellectual-cultural horizons of his community. There was only one other alternative source of enlightenment within the prevailing structure—the village teacher. Was he capable of the task? Early nineteenth century portraits of the village teacher, especially one attributed to estate owner and education promoter Johann Cornies (1789-1848), fail to inspire confidence in his intellectual prowess. He lived amidst an agricultural society not far removed from its frontier experience, a society whose life was characterized by rigorous toil. Here the concerns of raising sheep, cattle and horses, the realities of seeding and harvest, reigned supreme. Tobias Voth's (Orloff 1822-1829) experience as village herdsman does not suggest particular refinement, nor does his gathering of cow chips for fuel reflect the contemplative life.¹³ His career illustrates the dual tensions confronting the early teacher as a cultural agent. There was a constant struggle to achieve adequate qualifications which, if successful as in Voth's case, raised another problem. Could the community accept his sophistication? Tobias even found it difficult to enlarge the prevailing Bible knowledge. His Literacy Society (Leseverein), by his own admission, failed because "as time went on they stayed away."¹⁴ Of his prayer meetings for missions he wrote: "I remained alone with my family."¹⁵

The village teacher was there to teach reading and writing, not art, literature, or liberating ideas. The community process taught "knowledge" and beyond this

one only needed a few basic skills for record keeping. In Schoenwiese, where Voth taught briefly, many villagers felt that a year sufficed to acquire book knowledge. Reading as a pasttime or as a means of interacting with contemporary thought was virtually unknown. Education reinforced traditional village norms and introduced the student to the rudiments of reading, writing and arithmetic and, as a supplement, to Bible stories. Tobias Voth wanted more: the study of religion which would "be concerned with the state of the heart and what man may have in Jesus as Savior."¹⁶ Most of his contemporaries and successors were content with much less. Even Cornies and the Orloff school society found Voth's teaching ethereal and impractical. At a special meeting (January 31, 1829) between Voth and members of the Orloff School Association, Cornies admonished Voth to "conduct school in a manly way. . . ."¹⁷ Apparently his warm-hearted pietism did not produce men capable of subduing the Russian steppes. Voth's autobiography, a memorandum, and an article left by him convey the impression of a refined and cultured man who lived during a time "in which mankind is very calloused, very insensitive."¹⁸

The fact that the community severely circumscribed its concepts of "knowledge" and "learning" limited the capacity of the Mennonite mind to cope with new ideas. Teachers' conferences as late as the 1860s still focused on the old curriculum: reading, arithmetic and "Biblische Geschichten" (Bible stories). Knowledge in each subject was limited to the barest essentials and was acquired by rote. There were religious, moral, historical and grammatical facts to learn, and each student acquired these "truths" as he or she was able. Learning provided fixed values and notions; it rarely transcended local norms, opened new vistas or encouraged reflective or speculative thinking. In the early days, Cornies had decreed rules (some 88 of them) and curricula for the Molochnaya colony.¹⁹ Most of the twelve courses he advocated emphasized performance skills, whether in spelling, math, calligraphy, music or Bible memorization. Only in such subjects as Biblical or Church History was there any possibility of exploring ideas, and these were loosely joined to geography and nature study in

one course (no. 12). "Intellect" was very pragmatic. It focused on demonstratable skills and known truth, and was not intended to go beyond the collective community knowledge and proficiency. Under such circumstances, intellect was sustained but not expanded. Cornies' school reforms certainly improved the practical skills of young Mennonites in many areas, but hardly expanded the Mennonite mind. The world of ideas was ignored and, as the 1860s demonstrated, even small deviations in religious thought were not accommodated. A broad curriculum did not imply a broad intellect. As a school patron, Cornies encouraged a wider range of knowledge and insisted upon adequate teaching skills, yet could not tolerate an expansive, exploratory Tobias Voth. Cornies' interest in gifted children, his lending library, his stress on competition and individualism, his vision of a new kind of Mennonite through education—did all this really lead the Mennonite mind to new horizons or was his program a technical progression emphasizing greater efficiency and practicality? Where were the philosopher and sage with a deep concern for truth? Where was the critic boldly questioning existing norms and precepts?

That person was certainly not the teacher. By the mid-nineteenth century his position was esteemed and his distinctive role in the community recognized. The village respected his skills in handwriting, German and Russian, bookkeeping, and perhaps even land measurement. His knowledge of Russian history and politics as well as international affairs inspired some awe, though the usefulness of such information was not always readily understood. If, however, he aspired to become a prophet and seer and uttered mighty words of wisdom or admonition, he transcended his mandate. He must remain subservient to traditional values. At best he could be a quiet revolutionary, and for that role he needed incredible patience and tenacity.

The surviving letters of a young Molochnaya teacher, David Goerz, and those of his father, Heinrich Goerz, provide a rare glimpse into the life of a typical teacher. David was born in 1849 in Neu-Bereslav, not far from Berdyansk. At fifteen, he was diligently studying at the

Vereinsschule in Orloff. The teacher made every effort to teach me something useful."²⁰ He read books on land measurement, one of which he translated from Russian into German; there was algebra, and the prospect of soon working in geometry. David was well into cartography and had almost completed a map of the Molochnaya colony. He reported little progress in geography nor did he particularly enjoy the subject. By mid-March, 1864, he had "mastered" mineralogy and anticipated work in zoology and botany. Church and Bible history were also on the curriculum. Young David had covered all the Bible stories and "we are now reviewing them."²¹ The static electricity machine produced great excitement; its shocks "jarred the joints" severely. The enterprising teacher had also built a hydrogen gas cannon which, on ignition from wires connected to the electricity apparatus, fired its cork projectile with a pistol-like crack. A Mennonite weapons expert in Orloff! This was obviously one side of Herman A. Janzen which P.M. Friesen failed to discover.²² But how could one suspect a man who "loved poetry, singing, calligraphy and drawing," and who assiduously cultivated the "guitar and flute."²³ Janzen seems to have been something of an all-around genius. Friesen describes him as a "famous surveyor," a skill which he patiently taught young Goerz after school hours.²⁴ David also relates how his teacher lovingly nursed him during a severe ear infection and lanced the huge boils which subsequently developed.²⁵

A new world was unfolding for the village boy from Neu-Breslau. He was clearly enticed by what he was learning. "Things are still getting better," he informed his parents during his final year at Orloff—and they were, for on May 26, 1864, he successfully passed his public examination (Pruefung). One thing is clear from his letters: the accumulation of knowledge meant the mastery of specific subjects by rote, even in such humanities subjects as Bible and Church history. David makes no mention of Mennonite history or theology. June 22 found him at an auction in the Molochnaya village of Schardau, where the possessions of his deceased grandfather were sold. Goerz bought two books, the usefulness of which he carefully explained to his parents. "You will probably be wondering

why I bought books. Since they are conducive to my salvation they have been much help to me. The one for 75 kopecks is called *The Broad and the Narrow Gate*. The other contains Biblical genealogies etc.”²⁶ Father Heinrich Goerz, contrary to his son’s expectations, needed no reassurances. He gave the family library to the young bibliophile, who by now had taken a job as secretary and bookkeeper at an estate called Taschenack. If the 29 items were a typical Russian Mennonite home library, they possibly provide some insight into the forces shaping the Mennonite mind of 1865. Some of the items are reassuring: a book of sermons, a devotional manual, a volume on Christian doctrine by Spergenberg which in father’s estimation would be useful “in this confused time where differences, divergences and deceptions can so easily bring temptations,”²⁷ a few tracts, two books on the Holy Land, one volume on the Mennonite, and several pamphlets on Jewish life and history. There were several practical volumes: an atlas, a travelogue on South Russia; a French as well as a German dictionary; a theater almanac. Several novels completed the collection. Goerz’ resources were supplemented by several texts purchased as pedagogical aids. The expenditures forced him to cancel a planned summer visit to his parents in the Crimea!²⁸

The educational processes and materials shaping Goerz’s intellect were enriched by his experiences as a young teacher. While some of these may be constructed as being problems of a practical nature, they nevertheless graphically illustrate the degree to which the teacher influenced the local intellect. Goerz, though qualified as a village teacher, had worked as a secretary for some eight months after his graduation in May 1864. Then, when a position became vacant at Easter (1865), he began to instruct a class of eight students. He was reflecting the sentiments of Herman Janzen when he informed his parents that he had “entered the Lord’s vineyard.”²⁹ for he quoted a beautiful letter sent him by his former teacher. In July 1867, he tersely commented: “I am still young and have no desire to spend all life within four walls, in which one sacrifices ones health, experiences affliction and anxiety, and does not get ahead.”³⁰ Several situations apparently precipitated the

crisis. Invariably the village school found itself under some form of strict control, with either the Johannes Cornies pattern of a "local strongman" or a board comprised of wealthy patrons of the school. At the Taschenak estate Goerz had to endure its owner's caprice in matters of salary, contract renewal, and even summer jobs, not to mention Mrs. Cornies who delighted in scolding (lit. "thundering") him. The school lacked proper equipment and facilities, and all attempts to secure these were fruitless.³¹ David complained that a teacher "does not have sufficient possessions on which to lay his head and is solely dependent on (the benevolence) of strangers."³² What could he do besides teach? He had neither the capital for farming nor the training of a craftsman. It was David's father, a miller, who articulated the stark realities of a school teacher's life.

It is discouraging when the achievements and progress of a diligent teacher are not sufficiently valued and recognized. This can never be as long as the village schools are subject to arbitrariness, where so to speak every old woman can shoot off her mouth (die Nase ruempfen darf) about the teacher, his achievements and his handling of the children. And what good are the *Pruefungen* (public examinations) in the village school? Do they really promote progress? What finally is the difference between a capable, striving teacher and one, who through drink or other abortive pursuits, is constrained by need to call himself a teacher? Then in order to demonstrate his accomplishments at the public examination mechanically drills his pupils in facts of which they knew nothing three days earlier. The results of either examinations will not show substantial differences. Often such an (unfit) teacher can flatter his constituency. Then when a capable teacher who is master of his subject succeeds him, he experiences great difficulty because he does not know how to handle the community.³³

There were some very mundane problems:

The individual farmers who are to service the school often do so irregularly. Heating materials are of such

poor quality. . . that the teacher often spends weeks making it serviceable. . . . In Schardau, for example, the teacher not only used the dung from his cow for heating the school, but had to prepare the material as well. After all the school teacher has become so comfortable that he no longer wishes to work! And that Schardau teacher was one who knew how to live in unity with the village community, and in order to preserve that harmony had to smile at such a bad trick. Then of course he lived in the finest house in the colony and is often envied by the stupid and the crude. This enviable and beautiful house contains, next to the teacher's living quarters, a large schoolroom where a hundred and more children enter and leave several times daily. This room had to be kept clean, and if the teacher cannot keep a servant girl, which is naturally unthinkable, he must do it himself if he does not wish to overburden his wife. Prying the children's accumulated dirt from the floor; cleaning between the desks; washing the desks and generally tidying this building—this is not a small task.³⁴

Miller Goerz continued his perceptive analysis:

If one recounts all this and then knows that such a school teacher—in addition to a little grain (which is mostly consumed in his household) and other things—receives a salary of 125 rubles, the whole matter is scandalous. [This is especially so] if one compares this to the fact that a good hired man gets up to 150 rubles, plus free bed, board and washing, or to the fact that a good craftsman gets 300 rubles and more—and has no further obligations or responsibilities beyond his work—in fact lives more independently than Napoleon in France. It sounds wonderful that Abraham Goerz (David's brother) is the best school teacher in the entire colony, but what does Abraham Goerz get out of it? In the end he is the same as a spent soldier, who wears medals on his chest and has lost his healthy limbs, then in old age has to beg his livelihood. The late Braeul of Rudnerweide is ample proof of this. He taught school for some 30 years and also was a master painter. In old age he was forgotten and in spite of his many children—

who could do little to help him—lived under the most dire circumstances. I know this from a good source, Jacob Wiebe of Schardau, Braeul's son-in-law.³⁵

There is still another dimension.

Ab. Goerz has written me that there is talk of improving the school system and that a school board is to be elected. I have heard such talk as long as I can remember.

During Johann Cornies lifetime, thanks to his rare gift and insight, no village could fire or hire a school teacher without the knowledge and consent of the *Verein*. This provided at least some protection for the teacher who could turn to the *Verein* in the event of misunderstanding. Usually these were quickly resolved. Where have those times gone? Even this anchor and support (the *Verein*) has vanished with time and the village schools are helplessly tossed to and fro by the wind. A school board can only be useful when it is headed by a man who, in addition to being truly pious, is armed with the weapons of learning. Then he would be fully capable of leading the school, assessing the curriculum, evaluating the teacher, and above all awaken a desire to really achieve in an ambitious teacher. Let the school board or inspector divide the teachers according to their knowledge and abilities and arrange [their] classes accordingly. . . . How shall such a man be created? He certainly cannot be elected because in all likelihood no man, who can fulfill these requirements, exists. I think generations will pass before the schools are placed on a better footing!³⁶

For the most part Goerz's perspective was correct. The Mennonite teacher was incapable of surmounting the restraints placed on him by the community. The society which paid him his salary virtually dictated the limits of his role as an intellectualizing agent. He was permitted merely to impart literacy, and with it a basic knowledge of religion, science and arithmetic. With the exception of basic Christian truths, learning beyond the practical needs of the local economy was not considered necessary. An idealist or visionary had little future in such a setting. It took David

Goerz only two years to find that out. The teacher faced two alternatives: to work within community norms which maintained the status quo, or resign and seek employment elsewhere. Father Goerz astutely pictured the situation:

The public examinations which have been held in most village schools until now, are almost worthless. They are usually held before a public which understands little or nothing of the process and has little interest in it. By and large it views the whole affair as a diversion, as if a comedy was being staged for them. If one or the other expresses criticism or praise [the action], has no long range importance. Public examinations simply have no influence on the improvement of school instruction ³⁷

In the circumstances of 1867 Heinrich Goerz was right. As long as the community remained self-contained the Mennonite intellect was severely circumscribed. But he was possibly not aware of a slow, ongoing revolution which gradually freed the teacher from village caprice and distinctly expanded the Mennonite mind. Rather casually David Goerz spoke of the fact that "teachers who know Russian are much sought after within the colony."³⁸ For the Mennonites there was increasing exposure to the Slavic culture which contained them. It mattered little that the pressure was administrative and commercial in nature, since the only effective link between the Mennonites and their host culture remained the teacher. Spurred on by the Russian presence such teachers led a protracted, silent revolution which ultimately set the stage for intellectual expansion.

Men and Materials

Even under the pressures of the community one option remained open to both the teacher and the earnest seeker after knowledge: the reading of books. In the early nineteenth century, we can imagine Tobias Voth deeply immersed in the works of Jung-Stilling. In the decades which follow, others read the pietistical works of Arndt, Hofacker and Tersteegen. Johann P. Schabalie's *Die wandelnde Seele* circulated as a German equivalent of

Pilgrim's Progress. Here or there an 1834 Prussian edition of Menno Simon's *Foundation of Christian Doctrine*, as used by Johann Claassen of early Brethren fame, could be found. By 1850 the fourth or fifth volume in the family library might have been the *Unterhaltungsblatt*, filled with the latest news on farming, and possibly most frequently read.³⁹

There were also pamphlet and periodical materials by way of a supplementary literature. The mid-nineteenth century became something of a watershed in the availability of periodicals. *Mennonitische Blaetter*, with the frequent reports on the Russian Mennonite settlements, became potentially available in 1854. In 1863 the newly emerged Brethren were accused of favoring the *Friedensglocke* and assorted mission pamphlets.⁴⁰ Jacob Martens of Tiegenhagen (and minister at the Halbstadt-Orloff church) addressed two concerns to elder Jacob Hildebrandt of Chortitza: he was enclosing sample copies of the *Sueddeutsche Warte* and *Das Mennonitische Blatt* (Philadelphia), periodicals which would make good reading for that elder, as well as news appearing in *Der Volksfreund* (Koenigsberg); furthermore, he was sending some religious tracts left by the Englishman Melville, a Bible agent.⁴¹ Two other papers, the *St. Petersburg Zeitung* and the *Odessaer Zeitung* were also potentially available. When elder Benjamin Ratzlaff of Ruderweide wrote to the Chortitza elder Hildebrandt in 1840, he was concerned only about a song book not yet in print. Two problems had to be overcome: the necessary corrections had not been made and printing costs in Russia and abroad were prohibitive. Fortunately a Baptist "brother of the faith" named Tauchnitz, a Leipzig specialist in Bible printing, planned to open a printing establishment in the Molochnaya provided the colony paid the freight charges from Germany for the press.⁴² We don't know what happened to the printer, but the songbook was printed in Odessa in 1844. Until c. 1860 the only supplementary literature was possibly in the form of tracts and Bibles supplied by travelling ministers of Baptist and Quaker persuasion, or British and Foreign Bible Society representatives like John Melville.⁴³

David Goerz's letters from 1865-66 reflect a growing

love for books and a genuine thirst for knowledge. Books for him were still a precious and expensive commodity and their acquisition an obvious highlight. Others with education, leisure and some wealth were reading and inquiring as well. Many of the early adherents of Eduard Wuest were merchants and teachers, occupations which also figured prominently in the emergence of the Brethren. Cornelius Jansen of Berdyansk and later of migration fame (1874), became an ardent disseminator of Bibles and Christian literature. His personal library contained Menno Simon's *Fundamentals*, the Book of Martyrs, Mennonite hymnaries, Ludwig Hofackers' sermons, Milton's *Paradise Lost*, a church history, and even a volume on Mennonite history published in 1821. In his literary legacy there were references to the writings of Kierkegaard, Menno Simons, N.L. Zinzendorf, Paul Gerhardt, Johannes Arndt, Spurgeon and Bunyan.⁴⁴ Jansen might well have been a Prussian patrician active in the German consular service in Berdyansk and culturally and intellectually superior to his Russian brethren; but he had friends like Leonhard Suderman who aided him in his Bible distribution. Many in the Mennonite community eagerly purchased books and tracts. As a result the Mennonite mind could never return to its former confinement.

By 1870 the teacher was not alone in promoting an intellectual reawakening, though he remained central to the process, as did the school in which he taught. The heirs of the emerging renaissance were men like the historian Peter M. Friesen, and the teachers Cornelius B. Unruh and Jacob J. Braeul who in 1870 left for study in Switzerland, then continued their studies at Russian universities. As agents of higher learning, these men certainly surpassed their teachers in terms of training and exposure. In fact the young men who returned from Russian and German universities were possibly too formidable for the village community. High schools like Orloff and Halbstadt, where Unruh and Braeul focused their energies, emerged as the custodians of intellect for subsequent generations. Such schools frequently offered "half-way houses" for these academic overachievers and provided an acceptable, even honorable, role for them in Mennonite society. In this

somewhat elitist setting, their ideas did not have to tangle with popular opinion and prejudice at the village level. Here they freely applied their training and reproduced their own kind among their students, the majority of whom felt eternally indebted to them. Many of their proteges went on to teach in village schools and gradually exercised a decisive influence on prevailing standards.

One other mitigating factor allowed the university trained teacher to return to his community: he was as often a minister as well as a teacher—provided, of course, his discipline was not technical or scientific. Yet while the pulpit allowed some expansion of the Mennonite religious mind, the constituency itself, clinging to traditional teaching and liturgy, tolerated little novelty. Pulpit teaching was often a reaffirmation of existing knowledge and experience, not a quest for new frontiers. One curious aspect nevertheless remained: P.M. Friesen cites some teachers, who as honest doubters and religious nonconformists, nevertheless continued to be respected and employed by the Mennonite community. Perhaps the Mennonites were ethnically more accepting and doctrinally less exacting in Russia than later on in America.

These new teachers set into motion a most gradual religious-moral process of extreme significance for the Russian Mennonite community. Their pedagogical vision encompassed the pursuit of personal piety, a better knowledge of ones heritage, a sharpened social conscience, and a greater awareness of public morality. None of these processes interfered with the political life of the community, but their evolution in the thinking of the young substantially influenced the attitudes and decisions of the Russian Mennonite community. The ideals nurtured in the schoolroom eventually upstaged the political segment of the community, almost reversing the pre-1860 church-state relationship. During the 1880s the political tactics perpetrated against the landless as late as 1875 or the Brethren in 1860 were virtually obsolete. Community leaders viewed such an act as an affront to liberty and brotherhood and as contrary to the Christian confession. The quiet revolution of the late nineteenth century not only demanded morality and accountability in public office, but

resulted in positive social action as well. It was the piety and vision of the teacher which generated the early 20th century commitment to schools, hospitals, orphanages, mental institutions and schools for the deaf.

The teacher as a community leader also largely determined the kind of materials available to influence the Mennonite intellect. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, the bulk of the literature circulating in the Russian Mennonite colonies was predominantly devotional and edificatory in nature. The teacher usually agreed that it should be so. In most instances disciplines like philosophy, prose, poetry and history lacked an independent existence and were secondary to a religious focus.

Culturally and intellectually, the Russian Mennonites of 1900 were highly selective, while socially and economically society lived on a much more open level. One might speak of an ongoing popular culture, piously inclined, which was nourished by a rather standardized menu. The book seller Franz J. Goosen of Gnadenfeld was careful to inform his clients that he carried devotional and theological books, collections of sermons, tracts, school books in German and Russian as well as practical books on household management.⁴⁵ Gnadenfeld printers like Peter Janzen and J. & P. Reimer published and advertised sermon collections by Jacob Kroeker and Elder Heinrich Dirks.⁴⁶ Equally indispensable according to publisher Ediger of Berdyansk was Unruh's and Dueck's *Deutsche Grammatik*. During the first decades of the twentieth century there was no discernable shift in the type of intellectual nourishment available, but a welcome increase in its quantity. Abraham Kroeker's *Christlicher Familienkalender* must take considerable credit for this expansion.^{47 48}

Almost any pre-war volume of this periodical carried advertisements for *Deutsches Leben*, *Friedensstimme*, *Odessaer Zeitung*, *Mennonitische Rundschau* or the *St. Petersburger Herold*.⁴⁹ Small wonder that by 1909 a small rather uncultured village like Fischau (Molochnaya) had no fewer than nine different papers circulating.⁵⁰ Kroeker's publications not only advertised German periodicals but German religious publications as well.⁵¹ The publisher Emil

Mueller in Barmen promoted the books of F.B. Meyer, biographies of F.W. Baedeker and Torrey, as well as a long list of expository and devotional books. The Halbstadt bookseller H.J. Braun carried Mueller's publication as well as those of Max Kielmann (Stuttgart),⁵² P. Ott (Gotha),⁵³ Stephen Geibel (Altenburg),⁵⁴ G. Ihloff and Co. (Newmuenster).⁵⁵ In addition to these works from the "evangelical mainstream" in Germany, Braun's inventory included Bible commentaries and concordances, devotional and sermon books, biographies, adult and children's tracts. Among the pedagogical materials were no fewer than four of Cornelius Unruh's texts in reading, church history, religion and Bible history.⁵⁶

The boundaries of the Russian Mennonite intellect were essentially defined by the materials available for consumption. Some sociologists when explaining methods by which ethnic groups maintain their boundaries speak of "institutional completeness," a term describing the ability of an ethnic community to "perform all the services required by its members."⁵⁷ Perhaps the concept is useful in describing the "mature" Mennonite intellect of the early twentieth century. There was a sense of "literary completeness" which deemed certain types of literature containing a specified range of subject matter as totally acceptable. There was no deliberate censorship or a 16th century type of "official index." There was merely a prevailing consensus that the existing intellectual diet was adequate. It would be unfair to describe this stance as narrow minded or restrictive. For a Mennonite intellectual like P.M. Friesen, it was simply a question of "where he was at." The flow of ideas was governed by the flow of certain literatures, which until W.W. I proved amazingly consistent. W.W. I forcibly catapulted Mennonite young men into the far flung corners of the Russian Empire. This exposure had just begun to germinate new ideas when the traditional Mennonite world collapsed forever.

Formative Forces and Maturation

The metamorphosis of the Russian Mennonite intellect was complex and involved some implausible perspectives.

By 1870 the Russian language constituted an ongoing catalyst to this protracted process. During the first half century of their sojourn in Russia the Mennonites experienced little assimilation pressure from their Russian hosts. Russian was a peripheral novelty. As yet the presence of a Russian language teacher in the early years of the Mennonite secondary schools was apparently not a contentious issue. Heinrich Heese's sojourn in Orloff (1829-40) and Chortitza (1840-46) not only generated Russian language instruction but nationalistic poems as well. During the first years of the Halbstadt Secondary School (1835ff), at least one specialist in Russian language was considered essential.⁵⁸ Many teachers of the period seem to have had a sincere, if frustrated, desire to delve more deeply into things Russian, but the czarist russification pressures (1866-70) put a momentary end to this growing flirtation. Russian was now a necessity. One-third of the Mennonites left for America to escape the threat. Those who remained formulated a defensive strategy of mixed compromise and rigidity designed to protect them against assimilation. Mennonite teachers avidly studied Russian language and history and transmitted their knowledge to their high school students. According to Friesen, Herman August Janzen, the Orloff pedagogue (1860-67), "acquired a thorough knowledge of the Russian language."⁵⁹ For a time the same school even appointed a native speaker, Y.O. Krassovsky (1872-75), to instruct Russian.⁶⁰

The Halbstadt and Chortitza high schools likewise offered Russian language instruction, often utilizing native Russian teachers.⁶¹ Such efforts ultimately did not satisfy the authorities. Between 1897 and 1899, Russian became the compulsory language of instruction, but by then the schools were completely dominated by Mennonite teachers fluent in Russian. How was such a feat achieved in less than three decades? In the case of secondary schools like Orloff, Halbstadt and even Chortitza there appear to be a simple answer: few key teachers attended Russian institutions of learning and, with considerable skill in Russian, returned to teach in the colonies. Cornelius B. Unruh, J.J. Braeul and P.M. Friesen are cases in point. Unruh not only taught Blumenort children to read, write

and translate, but also to speak Russian.⁶² He had acquired his knowledge in Ekaterinoslav, Kiev, Odessa and Moscow.

Ironically while these men taught Russian they did not russify the Mennonite community politically, nor did they infuse any widespread knowledge of Russian culture. By 1900 the Mennonite school spoke Russian, but the community frame of reference was more Germanic and Mennonite than ever. This paradox was created by the fact that few Mennonites, destined to become "master teachers," trained in Switzerland and Germany. The theological and pedagogical inspiration of men like Unruh and Friesen came from the evangelical as well as the state seminary in the Canton of Bern, Switzerland. Friesen observed that the Swiss professors did what they could to provide the foreigners with an "adequate intellectual diet," a diet which they themselves felt "fully capable of appropriating. . . ."⁶³ Friesen, with a Russian teaching diploma in language, history and geography, nevertheless thought in terms of German pedagogical models. Unruh's texts in Bible history, reading, grammar and church history likely reflected his Swiss sojourn. Halbstadt teachers like Heinrich Franz II and Herman A. Lenzman both attended the Barmen-Missionshaus (Johanneum) and received a Prussian teacher's diploma from Moers. When Franz began to instruct he held qualifications like "no teacher before him."⁶⁴ The Chortitza secondary school teacher, Peter M. Riediger (1874-92) attended the teacher training institute in Halberstadt, Prussia and was strongly influenced by the German educator Karl Kehr. Upon his return, Riediger "not only had occasion to work according to the spirit of Kehr in the school, but also to influence his colleagues in the village schools."⁶⁵

The Russian Mennonite "training abroad" program, while affecting a relative minority of the teachers, was singularly effective. A few "master teachers" imported a progressive German methodology into schools where only Russian could be spoken, and in later years the German connection remained intact. Subsequent teachers also completed their apprenticeship at German and Swiss seminaries and teacher training institutes as well as the universities of Berlin, Leipzig, and Basel. The fact

remained, however, that most Mennonite teachers were still trained in Russia. Until W.W. I, however, the intellectual "threat" of foreign education was minor for, with few exceptions, the majority first passed through such Mennonite secondary schools as Halbstadt and Chortitza, then went on to complete their training in cities like Moscow, Kharkov, Feodosia, Odessa, St. Petersburg. After this they frequently returned to the colonies and reaffirmed their commitment to their people.

The Mennonite flirtation with German and Russian culture probably stabilized by 1900. It resulted in a "cultural reconstruction" which made apparent concessions to the Russian environment (including language fluency), while fundamentally resisting most things Russian. Here was a moderate intellectual renaissance which drew its inspiration from the best training available in Russia as well as abroad, yet the importation of "alien" culture into the Russian Mennonite communities produced little modification of traditional values. The subject matter assimilated by Mennonite teachers and taught in Mennonite schools expanded the constituencies' awareness of the larger world, but in the process created a stronger Mennonite identity. There was a purposeful application of the new knowledge without substantial submission to the foreign cultures from which it was derived. The Mennonite teacher of 1900 or 1910 spoke Russian and read Dostoevsky and Tolstoy, yet moved primarily in a minority culture and loyally upheld its values and traditions.

Another critical factor in Mennonite immunity to Russian culture related to Mennonite institutions, especially those schools systematically erected in response to the pressures exerted by the demands for state service and russification after 1870. In the case of the forestry service, the agency was almost completely controlled by Mennonites and so deflected assimilation pressures exerted by the Russian environment. Subsequent decades saw the erection of an institutional framework which not only shielded the Mennonites from their host without subverting its traditional identity. By 1910 the majority of Mennonites were entirely trained within the confines of their own ethnic group. Even those who departed from the community for

technical, medical or theological training rarely left the group as a consequence of this broader exposure.

Institutions were not the only explanation for the Mennonite immunity to the Russian world; there were geographic and occupational factors as well. The legal basis of Mennonite colonization in Russia provided for seclusion. The density of settlement was high, the arrangement of each village as well as the overall village pattern ensured easy inter-Mennonite accessibility. In most instances one's neighbor was a fellow Mennonite. This arrangement only experienced slight modification with the Mennonite settlement in Siberia. Even at the fringes of the settlement, the coterritorial society was often as German as Slavic. In later years the solitary Mennonite farmer living on the *chutor* (private farm) frequently resided within easy distance of the larger settlement or, if this were not the case, was able to educate his offspring via a Mennonite tutor or in Mennonite schools. The occupational structure of Mennonite society also helped resist Slavic influence, because the farmer in an all-Mennonite village experienced less alien exposure than a merchant or small industrialist. Landless families rarely migrated to "foreign" villages in search of work, nor were Mennonites prone to become wandering craftsmen, laborers, peddlers or tailors. Compared with other minorities in Russia, there were few "fringes" in the Mennonite world.

Perhaps the most important factor in Mennonite resistance to russification lay in explicit Mennonite attitudes toward things Slavic. From the very beginning of settlement in Russia the Mennonite cultural intellectual orientation was westward—first to the Prussian homeland, and in the second half of the nineteenth century to Germany collectively. There appears to have been an almost instinctive understanding that Germanness was basic to Mennonite survival in an alien culture. Men like P.M. Friesen and Cornelius Unruh embarked upon a fearless appropriation of Russian, secure in their own commitment to German language and culture. They saw no conflict or threat in promoting Russian culture because its range and influence in the Mennonite community was precisely defined. Two implicit assumptions possibly bolstered their confidence.

The first, shared with German Catholics and Lutherans in Russia, was the concept of *Auslandsdeutschtum* (perhaps literally "Germans abroad"). German and Mennonite colonists in Russia viewed themselves as a type of diaspora, looking towards their German homeland not only in terms of their cultural orientation, but for the sustenance of their very identity. The second assumption supposed that in a social, economic, and cultural sense the surrounding Slavic world was inferior to the Mennonite-German heritage and could add little or nothing to it. Whatever this superiority feeling contributed to Mennonite identity, it was ultimately stifling for it never allowed an indigenous culture to emerge, and Mennonite intellectual development was hampered by importation and imitation. On the one hand, these Mennonites stood outside of the mainstream of German literature and linguistic development and enjoyed only the "fringe benefits" which Mennonites studying in Germany brought home. If, on the other hand, it took initiative, it was hampered by its own provincialism. As a consequence the Mennonite contribution in, for example, literature, was of a marginal nature both qualitatively and quantitatively.

This provincialism constitutes the most painful dimension in the evolution of the Russian Mennonite intellect. In the last three decades of the nineteenth century the Mennonite teacher resolved to pursue higher thought, selected the linguistic vehicle, focused on Germany as the source of his inspiration and imported a complete intellectual package to Russia. Then emerged an obvious embarrassment: the newly acquired bride was barren. She produced no Muses to enrich Russian Mennonite life. Why did the carefully cultivated vine bear no fruit? P.M. Friesen, after voluminous descriptions of other aspects of the Mennonite experience, writes a "short and insubstantial" chapter on literature.⁶⁶ The reason: "intellectual-cultural works" were virtually nonexistent. In his doctoral thesis on Mennonite education, Leonhard Froese attempted to tabulate an inventory of Russian Mennonite publications from 1850 to 1925.⁶⁷ He found 52. Of 22 items classified as "creative independent works," nine publications were in the realm of history. Only seven were designated as literature, the remaining six constituting religious materials. Confessions

of faith, catechisms, hymn books and pedagogical works accounted for another 23 publications. Periodicals, calendars and yearbooks constituted an additional seven items. The majority of these publications appeared in the early twentieth century. The analysis raises a disturbing question. Why in general did the Russian Mennonites lack literary creativity? Several perspectives provide at least a partial answer.

As already mentioned earlier, the terms of Mennonite settlement in Russia created small closed communities which, once established, dictated norms acceptable to the common life which assumed a universal literacy but carefully delineated the limits of intellectual inquiry. Self-doubt and personal soul searching; criticism of community values such as blatant materialism; the questioning of traditional religious teachings and practices as well as verbal or literary exploration in such areas; these kinds of activities were out of the question. There was an acceptable literature for the later nineteenth century Mennonite which included devotional, travel, pedagogical, German classical as well as home and farm materials. Political commentary, except for rare articles in 20th century publications like *Friedensstimme* and *Botschafter*, was virtually unknown. As a small town people, the Russian Mennonites, however literate, generally restricted their interests to the village and volost level. Later nineteenth and early twentieth century Russian radicalism passed virtually unnoticed in the Mennonite world, as did the ongoing agrarian revolution which began with the emancipation of the serfs in 1866. The landless dispute of the 1850s and 1860s produced some literary polemics, but no literature capable of delineating the agony of the Mennonite soul. Perhaps Mennonites lacked the literary talent, the intense anger, or the heroic stance needed to produce quality literature.

While the community by its very setting discouraged a literature of depth there was another less obvious factor at work. Contrary to external appearances, the Russian Mennonites were caught in a cross-fire of multi-cultural influences. Throughout their extended pilgrimage from the Netherlands to Russia, the Mennonite religious experience

was always in the context of an "official" language, either Dutch or German. In administrative and economic areas German gave way to Russian in the later nineteenth century. Then too, the majority of the colonies were situated in the context of still another tongue, Ukrainian. Meanwhile, amidst languages old and new, Low German remained the only mechanism capable of expressing the Mennonite "soul" experience. Whatever the advantages of multi-lingualism for the Russian Mennonite, the fact remained that he possessed no literary language. He might dabble in Russian or more likely in German, but he could not fit into the cultural context of these languages without greater exposure to them, an exposure possible for a few during the last decades of the nineteenth century. But how could they express a community experience which did not take place in Russian or, for that matter, in German? Piety and prayer were German processes and could be performed with literary finesse, but the Russian Mennonite could not laugh at himself or his community in a foreign tongue. The only "good story" was a Low German one. Beyond Low German he possessed no language to express the pragmatic experiences of his workaday world, the pleasantries of village social life, the mood of the Ukrainian steppe, or his affection for his animals and the land. How was he to express his love for Maria—in broken Russian or formal German?

Why did a literate people produce so little creative literature? There was simply no language they could adequately utilize. Geographically and temperamentally they were barred from entering the Slavic soul. German language and literature was of course absorbed in much greater depth, but only individually and via cultural exchange. It arrived in Russia in second-hand condition, eagerly sought by some, enthusiastically imposed by others. German culture nevertheless retained an artificial quality for the language of everyday experience remained Low German. A novelist like Hans Harder wrote poignantly about his homeland, forever lost to him after World War I. Similarly, the poet Gerhard Friesen (Fritz Senn) has probed the heights and depths of the Mennonite psyche. In technically excellent German, both focus on bygone days.

They speak posthumously to their people's Russian experience. It is questionable whether the Mennonite of 1880 could have understood them. He may have better understood Bernhard Harder's (1832-1884) hymns and poems, but was Harder sensitive to the German language beyond its ability to describe his inner life with God? Like Harder and Senn, a writer like Jacob H. Janzen (1878-1950) only found response in another land and at a later time.

Perhaps Arnold Dyck was born too late as well. No other writer has better encapsuled the essential character of the Russian Mennonite experience. No detail escaped his scrutiny in *Verloren in der Steppe*. In it Dyck said all that needed saying, and he said it in German. Many in the community read and understood—again after the fact. Dyck also saw the interrelationship between language and community which few of the aspiring Mennonite literati before him understood, or if they did, took seriously. Low German, as a literary language, had been rejected by the very community which used it six days a week and on Sunday afternoon as well. But for Dyck, Low German was the essence of Mennonite community and not the vulgar peasant language often looked down upon by the more cultural (or Germanized?).⁶⁹ Here was the natural language easily fashioned into a literature capable of penetrating the very core of Mennonite being, and able to accurately reflect everyday life on the Russian steppe. Had Dyck been serious and lofty, his Low German stories would have failed. Instead, he made the Russian Mennonite laugh at himself and his people, something he could not do in German or Russian. His stories, so compelling in their innocence and yet so serious in their intent, awakened the reader's awareness. He felt at ease with his own identity. The narratives were stripped of moral artificialities and unattainable religious ideals and so allowed the Mennonite to view his strengths and weaknesses without any sense of guilt or judgement. By contrast, the older German poems and stories were too didactic, and filled with moral platitudes which disallowed self-discovery. Dyck's use of Low German was much more than comedy: it fused original language with the very soul which the language had produced. It was a language capable of profound dialogue,

sensitivity, and of powerful description. Pathos and tragedy in Mennonite literature was not the preserve of those who wrote in German. In one sense Arnold Dyck appeared too late to substantially remedy the lack of literary creativity among the Russian Mennonites. The community of which he wrote so lovingly no longer existed.

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FOOTNOTES

- 1 P.M.Friesen, *Die Alt-Evangelische Mennonitische Bruederschaft in Russland, 1789-19190* (Halbstadt, Taurien, 1911), p. 47. (Translated by the author)
- 2 *Ibid.*, p. 48.
- 3 *Ibid.*, p. 75.
- 4 *Ibid.*, p. 82.
- 5 *Ibid.*
- 6 "Aus der Gnadenfelder Gemeindechronik," *Mennonitisches Jahrbuch* (1909), pp. 109-110.
- 7 Friesen, *Mennonitische Bruederschaft*, p. 84.
- 8 Friedmann.
- 9 A. Ehrt, *Das Mennonitentum in Russland* (Berlin, 1932), p. 49.
- 10 F. Isaak, *Die Molotschnaer Mennoniten* (Halbstadt, 1908), p. 119.
- 11 *Ibid.*, pp. 114-116.
- 12 J.P. Bekker, *Origin of the Mennonite Brethren Church* (Hillsboro, Kansas, 1973), p. 56.
- 13 See his brief autobiography and a memorandum in Friesen, pp. 569-77.
- 14 *Ibid.*, p. 573.
- 15 *Ibid.*, pp. 573-74.
- 16 *Ibid.*, p. 572.
- 17 *Ibid.*, p. 574.
- 18 *Ibid.*, p. 576. T. Voth, "Ein Wort ueber Schulzucht," *Unterhaltungsblatt fuer deutsche Ansiedler im suedlichen Russland*, Vol. V, No. 1 (January 1850). pp. 70-72.
- 19 Isaak, *Molotschnaer Mennoniten*, pp. 280-290.
- 20 David Goerz Collection (Mennonite Library and Archives, N. Newton, Kansas). Cited hereafter as DGC. David Goerz to "beloved parents." Orloff, March 14, 1864.
- 21 *Ibid.*
- 22 Friesen, *Mennonitische Bruederschaft*, pp. 589-90.

- 23 *Ibid.*
- 24 *Ibid.*
- 25 DGC. D. Goerz to "beloved parents." March 14, 1864.
- 26 DGC. D. Goerz to "dear parents." July 10, 1864.
- 27 DGC. Heinrich Goerz to "dear son David." February 3, 1865.
- 28 DGC. D. Goerz to "dear parents." June 16, 1866. For several summers young Goerz supplemented his teacher's salary by working as a surveyor.
- 29 DGC. D. Goerz to "much loved parents." April 19, 1865.
- 30 DGC. D. Goerz to "dear parents." July 16, 1867.
- 31 *Ibid.*
- 32 *Ibid.*
- 33 DGC. H. Goerz to "dear David." October 11, 1867.
- 34 *Ibid.*
- 35 *Ibid.*
- 36 *Ibid.*
- 37 *Ibid.*
- 38 DGC. D. Goerz to "dear parents." July 16, 1867.
- 39 *Unterhaltungsblatt fuer deutsche Ansiedler im suedlichen Russland*, began publication in 1845 and printed twelve numbers per year. It apparently ceased publication in 1855.
- 40 A. Lenzmann, "An den Herausgeber," *Mennonitische Blaetter*, IX (May, 1863), p. 33.
- 41 Mennonite Library and Archives, North Newton, Kansas. Jacob Martens to Elder Hildebrandt. Tiegenhagen, August 29, 1860. The British and Foreign Bible Society agent, John Melville, first visited Russia in 1837. After 1842 he seems to have visited the Mennonites in Chortitza and the Lolochanya quite regularly. Martens was a close friend of Melville. See James Urry, *The Closed and the Open: Social and Religious Change Amongst the Mennonites in Russia* (Ph.D. dissertation, Oxford University, 1975), p. 592ff.
- 42 Mennonite Library and Archives, North Newton, Kansas. B. Ratzlaff to Elder J. Hildebrandt, Rudnerweide, May 21, 1840.

- 43 The Quakers Stephen Grellet and William Allen visited the Molochnaya Mennonites in 1819. R.C. Scott, *Quakers in Russia* (London, 1964), p. 113ff.
- 44 C.E. Reimer and G.R. Gaeddert, *Exiled by the Czar. Cornelius Jansen and the Great Mennonite Migration* (Newton, Kansas, 1956), pp. 26-30. Much of the Christian literature came from the founder of the Baptist Church in Germany, Johann Gerhard Oncken (1800-1884), who had founded a publishing firm and bookstore in Hamburg.
- 45 H. Dirks, *Mennonitisches Jahrbuch*, I (1903), p. 140.
- 46 J. Kroeker, *Im Heiligtum des Vaterunsers* (Gnadenfeld, Peter Janzen, 1899); H. Dirks, *Der Christ wie er sein soll* (Gnadenfeld, J. & D. Reimer, 1900), as advertised in *Christlicher Familienkalender*, IV (1900), 131, 159.
- 47 *Christlicher Familienkalender*, IV (1900), 137.
- 48 *Christlicher Familienkalender*, XII (1908), 136, 137, 193.
- 49 *Christlicher Familienkalender*, VI (1902), 142, 143.
- 50 See "The Russian Mennonite Village. A Documentary Portrait from 1909," American Historical Society of Germans from Russia, *Workpaper* No 25 (Winter, 1977), p. 38.
- 51 In addition to his many devotional books Kroeker published three periodicals: the *Christlicher Familienkalender* (1897-1914, 1918-1919); *Christliches Jahrbuch zur Belehrung und Unterhaltung* (1902-05); *Friedensstimme* (1903-1914, 1917-1920).
- 52 The following references are a sample from Vol. XII (1908) of the *Christlicher Familienkalender*, p. 169.
- 53 *Ibid.*, p. 175.
- 54 *Ibid.*, pp. 179-80.
- 55 *Ibid.*, p. 185.
- 56 *Ibid.*, p. 191.
- 57 R. Breton, "Institutional completeness of Ethnic Communities and the Personal Relations of Immigrants," *American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 70 (1964), p. 194.
- 58 Friesen, *Mennonitische Bruederschaft*, p. 597.
- 59 *Ibid.*, p. 589.
- 60 *Ibid.*, p. 590.

- 61 *Ibid.*, pp. 600ff; 616ff.
- 62 *Ibid.*, p. 591.
- 63 *Ibid.*, p. 592.
- 64 *Ibid.*, p. 601.
- 65 *Ibid.*, p. 617.
- 66 *Ibid.*, p. 669.
- 67 L. Froese, Das paedagogische Kultursystem der mennonitischen Siedlungsgruppe in Russland (Ph.D. dissertation, Goettingen University), p. 170.
- 68 F. Senn, *Das Dorf im Abendgrauen* (Winnipeg, Verein zur Pflege der deutschen Sprache, 1974).
- 69 C. Krahn, "Hans Harder, A Mennonite Novelist," *Mennonite Life*, VIII, No. 2 (April, 1953), pp. 78-79.

**BROTHERHOOD AND FAMILY:
IMPLICATIONS OF KINSHIP
IN MENNONITE BRETHREN HISTORY**

Alan Peters

The writing down of history is, by necessity, a translation. The "languages" of our lives are many—those of breathing, feeling, acting, dreaming and, above all, relating in many mysterious, surprising, and often indescribable ways to the people and forces around us. The compelling challenge to the historian is to listen sensitively to *all* these unwritten languages and somehow, perhaps miraculously, learn to translate them adequately into the hard, cold, printed word.

One unwritten "language" of our lives is that which speaks out of the relationship which each of us has in the family. Clearly, history does provide us with an abundance of examples where kinship and family have provided a startling influence upon the broader course of human events. Much of the Old Testament is filled with family records. The New Testament contains not only two separate tracings of the ancestry of Jesus himself, but also numerous comments regarding significant relatives of Jesus—parents, brothers, sisters, and even cousins. The Gospels and Epistles frequently allude to the family relationships of the apostles and other early church leaders. Not only does Scripture emphasize the sanctity and importance of the family, but it even uses "family" vocabulary to describe relationships within the Godhead and within the church. Anyone who demeans the importance and impact of the family is in conflict with the teachings and the examples of Scripture.

More recent history draws attention to such families as the Hapsburgs, Plantagenets, Stuarts, Rothschilds, Adams, and even the Kennedys, whose influence affected the history not only of their own countries, but of the entire world. Long stretches of world history are indeed more

concerned with the dynastic rule of notable families than with the rising and falling of nations and states.

Our attention then naturally turns to the church. With the Wesleys—John and Charles—as a conspicuous exception, historians rarely emphasize or consider family relationships as having any noticeable impact upon the history of the church. It almost seems as if the family, while having enormous influence upon secular history, suddenly becomes an insignificant force when the history of the church is being considered.

Obviously, such an observation raises certain questions and concerns, and indeed creates a nagging suspicion that most church historians may have overlooked a matter of great importance, and failed to recognize the special and remarkable influence which the family experience brings into every recordable life situation.

To some extent, P.M. Friesen was an exception. His history of the church pinpoints, in both text and footnotes, a surprising quantity of revealing family information, which leads the careful reader to the inescapable conclusion that Mennonite Brethren history has been deeply affected by family concerns and relationships. Just as important, Friesen made it possible for the student to delve further into this matter by carefully naming names and giving addresses and other indentifying information for the many participants in his history of the church.

However, Friesen commits some of the same oversights common to most other church historians. He, like others, virtually ignores the role of women in the history of the church. With the single notable exception of several references to Katharina Claassen, the wife of Johann Claassen, Friesen overlooks the unquestionable importance of wives, mothers, sisters and daughters in the history of the Mennonite Brethren.

Related to that oversight is another. Friesen does comment relatively frequently about certain family relationships between men, particularly men of the same last name, mentioning that they are father and son, uncle and nephew, or brothers. But he seldom notices or mentions the family relationships which occur through marriage, ignoring the fact that a startling number of important men

in Mennonite Brethren history were fathers-in-law, brothers-in-law, and sons-in-law of others significant in the history.

However, it was because of P.M. Friesen's tantalizing comments about the several family relationships which he does emphasize in his history, that I began twenty years ago to explore the family kinship patterns among the Mennonites and began to discover the intriguing complexity and significance of family relationships throughout the course of Mennonite Brethren history.

The purpose of this paper is to begin to remedy this traditional oversight, and call attention to the often-overlooked, but apparently very significant, occurrence of family relationships in Mennonite Brethren history, and to comment upon the implications of these relationships.

The Phenomenon

The beginnings and early history of the Mennonite Brethren Church are documented by a number of skilled historians. The most voluminous and most complete account is that written by P.M. Friesen.¹ Bekker, a participant in that history, provides an important, contemporary description of the early history,² while Lohrenz³ and Unruh,⁴ from a later perspective, write accounts that are based to a considerable degree on the earlier writings of Friesen. Most recent of all is the excellent historical analysis written by Toews.⁵

After reading all these accounts, the reader might briefly reconstruct the beginnings of the Mennonite Brethren Church as follows:

Confronted by the realization that a continual spiritual decline was occurring in the Mennonite colony known as the Molotschna Colony, a small group of men, who had been influenced by the preaching of a Pietist minister named Wuest, and by other experiences of careful spiritual self-examination, decided to register their objection to the corruption around them by requesting that they be served communion separately from the remainder of the church. When their request was denied, they responded in November 1859 by meeting together and, without authorization from the church,

observing communion under the leadership of a local school teacher, Abraham Cornelsen.

Denounced by the leaders in the established church, and rebuked at a stormy church meeting at the Gnadenfeld church, the small group asked Cornelsen to prepare a document of secession. On January 6, 1860, they met to consider the document, and agonized over it with prayers and earnest reflection. Of those present, eighteen men then signed the document, breaking their ties with the established church.

Asked by the elder of the Ohrloff church to explain their action, another document was signed on March 19, 1860, by thirty-two or thirty-three men (the sources differ!). Despite subsequent opposition and persecution, the church continued to grow. Johann Claassen, one of the members, represented the interests of the new church to officials at St. Petersburg, while the assistance of the Ohrloff church elder provided some relief to the members back home.

Seeking a place where they could live unprovoked, the church requested new land in the Kuban region, which the government finally granted them. With governmental recognition, persecution gradually subsided. The young church continued to grow, through efforts of evangelism among the Mennonites, other German-speaking colonists around them, and even among the Russians. By 1885, twenty-five years after the founding of the church, there were 1800 members in Russia, in contrast to the original eighteen.

Unfortunately, this "bare-bones" description of the historical events, while accurately reflecting most scholars' understanding of the founding of the church, overlooks the important "language" of the impact of the family, and takes no notice of the surprisingly close family relationships among the early members of the church. We shall now reexamine the beginnings of the church, this time concentrating upon the individuals who participated in the founding of the church, and considering the hitherto-unexamined family aspects in the establishment of the church.

To assist us, we shall refer to the early lists of Mennonite Brethren Church members which are included in the appendix to this article, just as they appear in Friesen's history and some other early sources. For the purpose of this paper, we will concentrate basically upon those who signed the documents of January 6 and March 19, 1860, thus considering the very earliest members of the church.

The Persons

The Cornelsen/Gaede Family

Much has been written in the existing history books about Abraham Cornelsen, the school teacher in Elisabethtal, and the mastermind of the secession. As with the others, however, little has been written about his background and family ties. Abraham Cornelsen was born on August 11, 1826, to Abraham Cornelsen and Maria Vogt.⁶ He was probably born in the village of Wernersdorf, where his parents had settled in 1824. He is known to have had two older brothers, Heinrich and Wilhelm, and one older sister, Agatha.⁷

While nothing is yet known about his brothers, there is an interesting family connection involving both his marriage and that of his sister. On February 1, 1849, he was married to Aganetha Gaede. His wife happened to be the sister of a certain Heinrich Gaede, who had earlier married Cornelsen's sister, Agatha. Consequently, from the very beginning, the Gaede family became closely involved with the early Mennonite Brethren Church.

The first Gaede prominently mentioned in Mennonite Brethren history was Cornelsen's nephew, Peter Gaede, who was an evangelist of sorts in the Kuban area. As a member of the Kuban Mennonite Brethren Church, he was instrumental in bringing the principles of the so-called "Ueberfroehlichen" into the Kuban community. After a rather stormy history, he and a number of his relatives and friends established a Kuban congregation of the church known as the "Bread-Breaker Church."⁸ Gaede later was converted to Seventh-Day Adventism. Despite this rather unusual episode, many members of the Gaede family remained in the Mennonite Brethren Church, and many

members of that family have played significant roles in the growth of the church.

Abraham Cornelsen and his wife raised a family of ten sons, each of whom also had a large family. Consequently, many Cornelsen descendants continue to represent the influence which Abraham Cornelsen had in the early church.

Perhaps the most significant contribution, however, which Abraham Cornelsen made in influencing the family composition of the Mennonite Brethren Church was his early evangelization of German-Lutheran families in the Don River region of Russia. Earlier, when other families were leaving for the Kuban, Cornelsen settled instead in the Don region and there established, and became elder of, a small Mennonite Brethren church, composed largely of the Lutherans in the area. When he later migrated to Hillsboro, Kansas, many of these families of Lutheran background accompanied him and settled in the Ebenfeld community near Hillsboro. Because of Cornelsen's influence, these families—the Seibels, The Hagens, the Reiswigs, the Reddigs, the Ollenbergers, the Heins, and others—became the latest families to achieve the status, within barely more than a single generation, of bearing what many call a “Mennonite” name.

The Klaassen/Wiens/Becker Connection

In this amazing collection of early M.B. church members, we find one of the most intricate and intertwining family networks in the church. Indeed, it was this intriguing group of relatives that first came to my attention, causing me to begin my exploration of *all* family ties among the early members of the church.

The historical accounts speak of old Franz Klaassen, who was apparently the oldest among the eighteen. He was called upon to lay hands upon the first elected minister, Heinrich Huebert, when no other “elder” could be found who would ordain the newly-chosen chief minister of the newborn church.⁹ What the history books do not tell us is that this man, on January 6, 1846, married the widow of Abraham Wiens, assuming responsibility for her eight Wiens children, among them Cornelius Wiens of Elisabeththal, also one of the eighteen. Indeed, it was in his

home that the fateful communion service of November 1859 was held. Yet another Wiens step-son of Franz Klaassen was Abraham Wiens of Elisabethtal, another signer of the secession document. One step-daughter was Anna Wiens, who was married to Bernhard Janzen of Blumenort, a signer of the two Kuban letters of 1862 and 1863. Still another step-daughter was Margaretha Wiens, who would shortly marry Jacob P. Becker, another of the eighteen original Brethren. To complicate matters even more, this Jacob Becker was the brother of Benjamin Bekker of Rudernweide, a signer of the "Explanation" document of March 19, 1860. And then Maria Becker, the sister of Jacob and Benjamin, was to become the wife of Abraham Regier of Ruderweide, another signer of the March 19 document. Last but not least, Benjamin Bekker, was soon to marry Anna Neufeld, the daughter of Heinrich Neufeld of Einlage, one of the founders of the Mennonite Brethren Church in the Chortitza Colony.

This intriguing web of family relationships among early members of the church certainly excites conjecture regarding the degree to which these family relationships influenced the very birth of the new church.

The Strauss/Reimer/Claassen Network

Here we see another amazing and intricate family system. Little is known about the Strauss family, except for the fact that August Strauss of Schardau was one of the four signers of the secession document who later withdrew from the fellowship when, against their advice and convictions, baptism by immersion was made mandatory in the brotherhood. Indeed, August Strauss is the only one of the four who is specifically named in any of the sources.¹⁰

Before he withdrew, however, he apparently influenced a good number of other Strauss family members, namely Gottlieb Strauss, Friedrich Strauss, and either one or two men by the name of Johann Strauss, all from the village of Waldheim, to join the movement and sign the March 19 document. David Doerksen of Waldheim, another signer of the March 19 document, was married to Karolina Strauss, a daughter of Gottlieb Strauss.¹¹ Jakob Reimer of Gnadenfeld, who also signed the March 19 document, was

married to Wilhelmine Strauss, another daughter of Gottlieb Strauss.¹² This Jakob Reimer of Gnadenfeld was, in turn, the brother of Cornelius Reimer, a signer of the Kuban letter of October 10, 1862, and an early settler in the Kuban. In addition, Katharina Reimer, a sister of Jacob and Cornelius Reimer, was the wife of Johann Claassen, perhaps the most renowned of all the original eighteen brethren. The relationships then become almost unbelievably complex when we realize that Dietrich Claassen of Mariental, an older brother of Johann Claassen, was another of the eighteen, and P.M. Friesen carefully itemizes and identifies still another four Claassen family members among the signers of the Kuban letter of 1862.¹³

It is rather significant to note that Katharina Reimer, Mrs. Johann Claassen, is the only woman member of the early Mennonite Brethren Church whose opinions and correspondence are recorded in the various histories, especially that of P.M. Friesen. Even here, however, her influence is only a matter of record during the times that her husband was away, either in St. Petersburg, representing the interests of the young church, or off exploring the Kuban region, soon to be settled by a group of Mennonite Brethren.

The Huebert/Harms Family

Relatively little is known of the family circle of the first elder of the Mennonite Brethren, Heinrich Huebert. P.M. Friesen makes virtually the only references to elder Huebert's family by mentioning that Simon Harms, a signer of the March 19 document, was his son-in-law.

The Koop Family

Likewise, little is currently known about the father and son team from Elisabeththal, Isaak Koop Sr. and Isaak Koop Jr. The father, however, is recorded as one of the eighteen founders, and P.M. Friesen reports that both father and son signed the Kuban letter of December 30, 1863.¹⁴

The Penner Family

Bernhard Penner, a signer of the March 19 document, is one of the more colorful personages in the early history of

the M.B. Church. According to P.M. Friesen, he was still unmarried when he signed the document of March 19.¹⁵ He later was one of the primary participants in the so-called "Ueberfroehliche Richtung." Indeed, Bernhard Penner, Benjamin Bekker, and Gerhard Wieler, who was from Chortitza, became the self-appointed "apostles" of the movement. Friesen also provides some clues about Penner's identity by reporting that he eventually became an Adventist,¹⁶ and at one point Friesen calls him Bernhard Penner Jr.¹⁷

Because of these various clues in Friesen, I am inclined to identify this Bernhard Penner with one whose family ties are recorded in a privately published genealogy of the Dyck family.¹⁸ This Bernhard Penner, a son of Rev. Bernhard Penner (a minister of the Gnadenfeld church) and Anna Dyck, was born August 12, 1838, and is recorded in the genealogy as residing in the village of Gnadenfeld. He was married to an otherwise unidentified woman with the surname Neufeld. Most significantly, the genealogy states that many of his descendants are members of the Seventh Day Adventist Church.

The most interesting family involvement of this Bernhard Penner is the fact that his brother, Aron B. Penner, was an ordained minister in the earlier-mentioned "Bread-Breaker Church." This Aron B. Penner migrated to the United States and established the church as the "Church of God" in Fairview, Oklahoma. Because his son, Aron A. Penner, followed him as leader of this church, it is frequently called the "Penner-Church." This would provide yet another family linkage between the Mennonite Brethren Church and the "Bread-Breaker Church" established by Herman Peters, who himself was, interestingly enough, a signer of the Kuban letter of December 30, 1863.

The Kroeker/Janzen Family

Jakob Kroeker, a resident of the village Lichtfelde, signed the March 19 document. He had been born in 1822 in the village Margenau to Julius Kroeker and Anna Janzen. Of the early M.B. members, for whom family records and data are available, he has the singular distinction of being remarkably free of family relationships with the others. His

wife was a Maria Janzen, and many of her family some time later became Mennonite Brethren. One of Jakob's younger half-brothers, David Kroeker, also later joined the Mennonite Brethren Church. However, in rather stark contrast to the others we have mentioned, no known relationship exists between Jakob Kroeker and the other founders and early adherents of the Mennonite Brethren.

Perhaps this accounts in part for the very interesting pilgrimage of this particular family. Jakob Kroeker and his family moved to the Kuban in 1869, and his children attended school in the village of Tempelhof under the teacher Friedrich Lange, a founder of the "Templar Church" in the Kuban. Indeed, Jakob Kroeker's son Jakob states that he was converted, baptized by Rev. Lange, and joined the Templar Church. He later married Anna Neufeld, another member of the Templars. They remained members of that church until 1877, when they joined the Mennonite Brethren Church of the Kuban.¹⁹

The father, Jakob Kroeker, was one of the few Kuban residents who joined the trek to Central Asia under the leadership of elder Abraham Peters, who took his independent Mennonite congregation to Turkestan, believing that the Second Coming of the Lord would occur in that region. It was only after the death of elder Peters in 1882 that the Peters-Church decided to become the Nikolaipol Mennonite Brethren Church.²⁰ It is of great interest to notice that the Janzen family, namely the brothers and sisters of Maria Janzen (Mrs. Jakob Kroeker), were hearty supporters of elder Peters and the migration to Asia, and thus the family relationships there appear to have influenced the Kroekers to join with Peters, rather than remain in the Kuban among the Mennonite Brethren, where few of their relatives were church members.

The Other Signers

Family information regarding the other signers of the early documents, namely Martin Klassen, Abraham Wiens of Lichtfelde, Daniel Hoppe, Isaak Regehr, Andreas Voth, Jakob Wall, Peter Stobbe, Abraham Peters, Wilhelm Bartel, Heinrich Flaming, and Johann Hiebert, is almost totally lacking at this time. Hopefully, such information

will be uncovered, providing further details about their family connections. What does seem significant is the fact that virtually every early member of the Mennonite Brethren Church for whom family records *are* available, shows close family relationships with others among the founders of the church.

* * * * *

There are several other persons of importance to the early Mennonite Brethren Church, who, while not becoming members themselves, have family relationships that add a new dimension to our understanding of Mennonite Brethren history. The following two men are of particular interest.

Johann Harder

All accounts of the early years of the Mennonite Brethren Church give much credit to the support given to the struggling young church by the elder of the Ohrloff church, Johann Harder. In fact, Johann Claassen quoted Senator von Hahn, a Russian official, as saying, "For your deliverance you are indebted to elder Harder."²¹ Without the support of the Ohrloff church and its elder, the young Mennonite Brethren Church could hardly have survived. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that many of Harder's descendants are now members of the Mennonite Brethren Church. His oldest son, Johann, born in 1836, became a leading minister of the Krimmer Mennonite Brethren Church, and assisted elder Jakob A. Wiebe in the leadership of the Gnadenau church in Kansas. Descendants of this Johann Harder are found throughout the United States as members of the Mennonite Brethren Church.

Elder Harder's second son, Abraham J. Harder, was likewise a teacher and minister in Russia, and his son Johann A. Harder was minister of the Borden (Saskatchewan) M.B. Church for many years. It is also interesting to note that the above-mentioned Abraham J. Harder was married to Anna Fast, a daughter of Bernhard Fast, elder of the Ohrloff church immediately before Johann Harder. This elder Fast was himself considered to be an

earnest supporter of religious reform within the Mennonite community of the Molotschna colony, and was himself sympathetic toward the founding of the Mennonite Brethren Church.

David A. Friesen

The influence of this man was also unmistakable in the early years of the Mennonite Brethren Church. As the colony administrator, or *Oberschultz*, in the Molotschna, he was the outspoken and powerful opponent of the young church. Indeed, as long as he was colony administrator, he vociferously opposed any toleration of the new church, and persuaded most of the colony leaders—both secular and religious—to join him in that opposition. The ironic fact, however, is that Friesen's daughter, Justina, had married Jakob A. Wiebe in 1857. This Jakob Wiebe, of course, was soon to establish the Krimmer Mennonite Brethren Church. That body, by merger in 1960, joined hands with the Mennonite Brethren Church, bringing many of *Oberschultze* Friesen's descendants into membership in the very church which he opposed so energetically.

Some Observations and Proposals

We could explore the impact of the family on Mennonite history both before and after 1860. Even the founding of the *Kleine Gemeinde* in 1814 had the earmarks of a "family" affair. Klaas Reimer, the founder and first elder of the church, was married to a certain Helena Friesen. Her brothers and sisters constituted much of the membership of that new church, and ever afterward the surnames *Reimer* and *Friesen* dominated the history of the *Kleine Gemeinde*. For example, the second elder of the church was Abraham Friesen, the brother of Helena Friesen Reimer. The third elder was Johann Friesen, her nephew. Even today, the membership of the Evangelical Mennonite Church of Canada, the Canadian portion of the Church of God in Christ, Mennonite, and the Emmanuel Mennonite

Church of Meade, Kansas, all of which find their roots in the *Kleine Gemeinde*, are populated by a host of Reimers and Friesens, the descendants of Helena Friesen Reimer and her brothers.

We could also look into recent Mennonite Brethren history and see ongoing examples of the influence of the family. One need only mention the name *Hiebert* among Mennonite Brethren, and immediately a certain Minnesota-based family comes to mind, from which have come a long succession of ministers, missionaries, and scholars. This very symposium, and the one held several years ago to commemorate the publishing of a new history of the Mennonite Brethren Church, show ample evidence of what impact the family *Toews* has had upon both Mennonite history and the recording of it.

However, the patterns of family relationships we have discovered among the early members of the church, and the continuing, historic impact which certain families have had upon the ongoing life of the church, clearly demonstrate that family and church are closely related concepts. There are unmistakable lessons we can learn by observing that church and family go hand in hand—indeed, perhaps, that church *is* family, and family *is* church!²²

Proposal #1: New Movements Originate out of the Family

I propose that this phenomenon is true in both secular and religious movements. This could be the natural outcome of a hitherto undiscussed assumption that deeply-felt convictions are most quickly relayed to persons closest to you. There is a natural tendency for one to share his revolutionary and somewhat dangerous thoughts and ideas first with someone whom he trusts not to betray him, and with someone from whom he has regularly received comfort and support. The logical sounding board for new ideas is the family. The very same line of reasoning can be used regarding evangelism. The proponents of a new idea—particularly an idea which calls for commitment, allegiance, and sacrifice—will seek to share their newfound commitment first with those they care for, namely their family.

Proposal #2: New Movements try to Duplicate the Family

The family is such a recognized, obvious source of strength and support, that each new movement seeks to follow its example as a model of cohesiveness, acceptance, mutual concern, and respect. It is no accident, and certainly not a mere affectation, which causes adherents of a new movement to address each other as "brothers" and "sisters." It is likewise no coincidence that newly-created, closely-knit organizations frequently speak of themselves as "brotherhoods," "fraternal orders," "fraternities," "sororities," "la nuestra familia," or even "Bruedergemeinde." The model of the family is so powerful in its influence that every organization concentrates upon duplicating it in spirit, closeness, and strength.

Proposal #3: The Survival of a Movement Depends upon its Faithfulness to the Family Concept

The welcome of a new member to an established group must also be understood as an acceptance to the family. The power and witness of the early Mennonite Brethren Church, for example, was so all-encompassing that the conversion of Lutherans and Catholics from the surrounding colonies meant not only acceptance in the church, but also an invitation into the family. That invitation was so strong that many current so-called "Mennonite" family names were "Lutheran" and "Catholic" family names only a century ago. The Kuban Mennonite Brethren Church membership list of 1878, reproduced as an appendix to this article, shows the presence already in Russia, of a large number of new families who had been welcomed into both church and family. One of the shortcomings of the Mennonite Brethren Church during much of its recent history has been its duplicity in evangelizing and seeking the conversion of all types of persons within its reach, while simultaneously refusing to welcome these converts into the family as sons-in-law and daughters-in-law. You cannot call someone "brother" and at the same time forbid him your daughter's hand in marriage. Hopefully, we have learned this lesson. Just as hopefully, a century from now there will be a long list of new "Mennonite" family names!

Proposal #4: The Influence of the Family Upon a new Movement Implies the Related Powerful Influence of Women Upon that Movement

Historians have traditionally overlooked the role of women upon history. That oversight has particularly plagued writers and recorders of church history. Certainly, if families have an impact upon history, we must recognize that those families contain mothers, wives, sisters, and daughters. The difficulty for the historian, however, is the fact that the role of women has generally been subordinated to that of men, and thus it is nearly impossible to isolate the influence of women from that of the significant men around them. The pronouncements of the great men of history are seldom identified as reflecting the insights of their mothers, wives, or sisters. But this was virtually the only way that a gifted woman's influence *could* be expressed until recently—through her father, husband, brother, or son. I propose that the nature of relationships among the early Mennonite Brethren is indicative that the women had considerable influence. The frequency of "in-laws" among the founding brethren implies that the common relative of both, a woman, had exercised some influence in causing both of the men involved to join in the common task of religious rebirth. Since the early Mennonite Brethren Church forbade women to speak in church,²³ they were constrained to speak in the only way they could, through their husbands, brothers, and sons.

* * * * *

The study of the impact of the family upon history is still in its beginning stages. Because of the scarcity and remoteness of the relevant and specific resources, the discovery of family influence is often an exercise in detective work, deduction, and reading between the lines. This paper represents the current state of this exercise, as it relates to the family in Mennonite Brethren history. As the power of the family becomes more widely understood, and as family records and reminiscences are discovered and interpreted, there will hopefully be a more comprehensive

and definitive examination of that linkage between history and the family.

I challenge each of you to consider the impact of the family in history, as it has been described in this paper. More important, I call upon each of you to reflect upon your own personal history, and evaluate the impact which your family has had upon you and your own pilgrimage. Perhaps we can, all together, learn to understand that family "language" well enough, so that historians will no longer have reason to ignore it.

Mennonite Genealogist
Fresno, California

FOOTNOTES

- 1 P.M. Friesen, *Die Alt-Evangelische Mennonitische Bruederschaft in Russland (1789-1910)* (Halbstadt, Taurien, 1911).
- 2 Jacob P. Bekker, *Origin of the Mennonite Brethren Church* (Hillsboro, Kansas, 1973).
- 3 John H. Lorenz, *The Mennonite Brethren Church* (Hillsboro, Kansas, 1950).
- 4 A.H. Unruh, *Die Geschichte der Mennoniten-Bruedergemeinde 1860-1954* (Winnipeg, 1955).
- 5 John A. Toews, *A History of the Mennonite Brethren Church* (Hillsboro, Kansas, 1975).
- 6 These are the names of his parents as recorded in the church records of the Ebenfeld (Kansas) Mennonite Brethren Church. The Mennonite Encyclopedia errs when it gives his mother's name as *Agnetha*.
- 7 *Der Deutsche Westen*, August 13, 1908.
- 8 Bekker, *Origin*, pp. 158-166.
- 9 One account is found in Lohrenz, *op. cit.*, p. 30.
- 10 Friesen, *Mennonitische Bruederschaft*, p. 247.
- 11 Records of the Corn (Oklahoma) Mennonite Brethren Church.
- 12 Gerhard Reimer, *Reimer Family Materials*, unpublished manuscript.
- 13 Friesen, *Mennonitische Bruderschaft*, pp. 337-338.
- 14 *Ibid.*, p. 343.
- 15 *Ibid.*, p. 199 (footnote).
- 16 *Ibid.*, pp. 201-202.
- 17 *Ibid.*, p. 295.
- 18 *Genealogy of Berend Dyck*, privately published.
- 19 Marcellus Duerksen, *A History of the J.J. Kroeker and John Warkentin Families*, privately published.
- 20 My grandfather, Dietrich D. Peters, personally recounted to me that his grandfather, elder Abraham Peters, who

had come into contact with the Mennonite Brethren when he was a minister of the Ohrloff church, encouraged his followers from his deathbed to become a Mennonite Brethren congregation. This they did after his death in 1883.

21 Toews, *op. cit.*, p. 49.

22 For further discussion of this matter, see Alan Peters, "The Impact of the Family in Mennonite History," *Direction*, I (July, 1972), 74-81.

23 Bekker, *Origin*, p. 95.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX A —The Signers of the Secession Documents,
January 6, 1860

Abraham Cornelssen	Elisabethtal
Cornelius Wiens	Elisabethtal
Isaak Koop	Elisabethtal
Franz Klassen	Elisabeththal
Abraham Wiens	Elisabethtal
Martin Klaassen	Lichtfelde
Abraham Wiens	Lichtfelde
Daniel Hoppe ¹	Schardau
August Strauss	Schardau
Jakob Boecker ²	Rudnerweide
Isaak Regehr ³	Pastwa
Andreas Voth	Pastwa
Jakob Wall	Pastwa
Johann Claassen	Liebenau
Heinrich Huebert ⁴	Liebenau
Peter Stobbe	Ladekopp
Abraham Peters ⁵	Ladekopp
Diedrich Claassen	Mariental

-
- 1 Unruh calls him *David* Hoppe; both Friesen and Bekker say *Daniel*.
 - 2 His last name is spelled differently in all three sources. Friesen gives *Boecker*, Bekker gives *Bekker*, and Unruh gives *Becker*.
 - 3 Both Friesen and Bekker say *Regehr*; Unruh says *Regier*.
 - 4 Friesen says *Huebert*; both Bekker and Unruh say *Hiebert*.
 - 5 Friesen and Bekker correctly state name as Abraham *Peters*; Unruh errs in naming him Abraham *Klassen*.

**APPENDIX B—The Signers of the “Explanation”
Document of March 19, 1860**

David Claassen	Ladekopp
Abraham Peters	Ladekopp
Peter Stobbe	Ladekopp
Heinrich Huebert	Liebenau
Simon Harms	Liebenau
Johann Claassen	Liebenau
Gottlieb Strauss	Waldheim
Johann Strauss ¹	Waldheim
Friedrich Strauss	Waldheim
David Doerksen	Waldheim
Jakob Reimer	Gnadenfeld
Heinrich Bartel	Gnadenfeld
Bernahrd Penner	Gnadenfeld
Jakob Boecker ²	Rudnerweide
Benjamin Bekker	Rudnerweide
Abraham Regehr	Rudnerweide
Jakob Wall	Pastwa
Isaak Regehr	Pastwa
Andreas Voth	Pastwa
Wilhelm Bartel	Berdjansk
Isaak Koop	Elisabethtal
Abraham Cornelssen	Elisabethtal
Franz Klassen ³	Elisabethtal
Abraham Wiens	Elisabethtal
Cornelius Wiens	Elisabethtal
August Strauss	Schardau
Daniel Hoppe	Schardau
Heinrich Flaming	Schardau
Martin Klassen	Lichtfelde
Jakob Kroeker	Lichtfelde
Abraham Wiens	Lichtfelde
(Johann Hiebert	Wernersdorf) ⁴
(Diedrich Claassen	Mariental) ⁵

1 Friesen lists *two* men by this name as being signers from Waldheim; Bekker lists only one.

- 2 Friesen, in a footnote, emphasizes that Jakob signed his name *Boecker*, while Benjamin signed his *Bekker*. Bekker gives both as *Bekker*.
- 3 Friesen gives name as *Klassen*; Bekker says *Klaassen*.
- 4 Johann Hiebert is listed only by Bekker.
- 5 Diedrich Claassen is listed only by Friesen.

**APPENDIX C — Participants in the Election of Leaders,
May 30, 1860**

Martin Klassen	Lichtfelde
Abraham Wiens	Lichtfelde
Jakob Kroeker ¹	Lichtfelde
Franz Klassen	Elisabethtal
Kornelius Wiens	Elisabethtal
Abraham Wiens	Elisabethtal
August Strauss	Schardau
Daniel Hoppe	Schardau
Heinrich Flaming	Schardau
Dietrich Claassen	Mariental
Isaak Regier	Pastwa
Abraham Regier	Rudnerweide
Jakob Boecker	Rudnerweide
Benjamin Bekker	Rudnerweide
Jakob Reimer	Gnadenfeld
Bernhard Penner Jr.	Gnadenfeld
Heinrich Bartel	Gnadenfeld
Gottlieb Straus	Waldheim
Johann Strauss	Waldheim
Friedrich Straus	Waldheim
David Dirksen	Waldheim
Johann Huebert	Wernersdorf
Heinrich Huebert	Liebenau
Simon Harms	Liebenau
Peter Stobb	Fuerstenau
Abraham Peters	Ladekopp

David Claassen
 Andreas Voth

Ladekopp
 Pastwa

-
- 1 Friesen mentions that the name of Jakob Kroeker was crossed out in the original document, and no vote is recorded for him.

APPENDIX D — Signers of the Letter of October 10, 1862

Abraham Peters	
David Claassen	(older brother of the Deputy)
Johann Claassen	(David Claassen's son)
Peter Stobbe	
Peter Martens	
Heinrich Nickel	
Benjamin Bekker	
Peter Nickel	
Johann Claassen	(the Deputy)
Cornelius Reimer	
Johann Claassen	(nephew of the Deputy)
Cornelius Knelsen	
Simon Harms	
Johann Huebert	
Peter Dyck	
Johann Martins	
Cornelius Penner	
Jakob Reimer	
Dietrich Claassen	(older brother of the Deputy)
Bernhard Penner	
Johann Strauss	
Friedrich Strauss	
David Duerksen	
Abraham Dyck	
Franz Claassen	
Isaak Koop	

Abraham Wiens
 Heinrich Flaming
 Abraham Regier
 Heinrich Neufeld
 Dietrich Claassen
 Bernhard Janzen
 Martin Klassen
 Jakob Kroeker
 Abraham Wiens
 Wilhelm Loewen
 Heinrich Huebert
 Jakob Boecker

(Dietrich Claassen's son)

APPENDIX E—Signers of the Letter of December 30, 1863 Regarding the Kuban

Heinrich Huebert
 Jakob Reimer
 Bernhard Penner
 Jakob Boecker
 Heinrich Neufeld
 David Duerksen
 Friedrich Strauss
 Franz Klassen
 Isaak Koop
 Abraham Wiens
 Isaak Koop
 Peter Stobbe
 Heinrich Flaming
 Wilhelm Loewen
 Andreas Voth
 Dietrich Claassen
 Jakob Kroeker
 Johann Friesen
 Gerhard Friesen
 Franz Friesen
 Herman Peters

(son of the above)

(founder and elder of the
Herman Peters Church)

Jakob Martens	Peter Siemens
Heinrich Boldt	David Claassen
Abraham Eidzen	Cornelius Pauls
Daniel Eidzen	Franz Martens
Johann Martins	Johann Claassen
Cornelius Penner	Cornelius Reimer
Heinrich Penner	Abraham Dyck
Abraham Penner	Johann Claassen
Franz Wall	Benjamin Bekker
Abraham Deleske	Klaas Huebert
Jakob Deleske	Jakob Giesbrecht
Jakob Devehr	Peter Nickel
Cornelius Wiens	Dietrich Claassen
Bernhard Janzen	Johann Claassen
Abraham Neufeld	Peter Buhler
Heinrich Friesen	Cornelius Knelsen
Wilhelm Giesbrecht	Peter Dueck
Cornelius Claassen	Abraham Huebert

**APPENDIX F —List of Members of the Wohldemfuerst
(Kuban) Mennonite Brethren Church on January 1, 1878**

Living in Wohldemfuerst

Br. Karl Kalweit and wife
 Br. Jakob Neufeld and wife
 Br. Simon Harms and wife
 Br. Abraham Wiens and wife
 Br. Johann Gudwin and wife
 Br. Johann Gudwin and wife
 Br. Heinrich Flaming and wife
 Widow Huebert
 Br. Jakob Penner and Sister P.
 Br. Ernst Stark and wife
 Br. Kor. Prachtnau
 Br. Kornelius Jantz
 Br. Franz Schinkowsky
 Br. Julius Grossmann

Br. Wilh. Krampe
 Br. Heinrich Huebert
 Mrs. Clas Huebert and Karolina
 Br. Kor. Reimer
 Br. Jakob Engbrecht
 Br. Peter Blok
 Br. Abraham Peters and Daughter
 Br. Daniel Fast
 Kor. Wiens
 (illegible) Dueck
 (illegible) Gaede
 Br. Abr. Gaede
 Sister Agatha
 Sister Martens
 Br. Joh. Klass.
 Br. Isbrand
 Sister Anna Regehr
 Sister Susanna Isaak
 Br. Peter Baerg
 Sister Pauls
 Sister Buller
 Sister Goertzen
 Br. Peter Goertz
 Br. Georg Rueffel
 Sister Krause
 Sister Kornelsen
 Br. Abr. Loewen
 Br. Gottlieb Goertz

Living in Alexanderfeld

Sister Friesen
 Sister Helena Friesen
 Br. Jakob Martens and daughter
 Br. Gerh. Perner
 Br. Jakob Kroeker
 Br. Johann Perner
 Br. Heinrich Peters and son
 Br. Abrah. Peters
 Br. Kornel. Krause
 Br. Peter Perner and son

Br. Siebert Goertzen and son
Sister Helena Friesen
Br. Abrah. Huebert
Sister Defehr
Sister Reimer
Br. Gerhard Goertzen
Br. August Lierman
Br. Johann Nefeld
Sister Margr. Kr.
Br. Abrah. Goertzen and his son Abraham
Brud. Freumark(?)
Br. Kornelius Funk
Brud. Heinrich Nikel
Br. Peter Nikel
Br. Bernhard Janzen

JOHANN CLAASSEN: TRAILBLAZER FOR THE BRETHREN

A.J. and Betty Klassen

Introduction

The role of leadership is crucial in the life of any organization. This was particularly true in the formation and early development for the Mennonite Brethren Church.

Johann Claassen was the acknowledged trailblazer of the brethren in the 1860's. However, the term "trailblazer" was not coined by Mennonite Brethren. It was first assigned to Claassen by the wider circle of the Russian Mennonite Brotherhood.

Johann Fast of Neuhalbstadt, known to his contemporaries as "Secretary Fast" because of his role at the Halbstadt administrative office, repeatedly referred to Claassen as "a trailblazer for justice and freedom."¹ Claassen was the first Mennonite to petition the authorities in Petersburg for protection against the social injustices of the oppressed by the Russian Mennonite Establishment. His negotiations finally opened doors for the landless Mennonites in Southern Russia to obtain property outside the original colonies of Chortitza and Molotschna, and migrate to the Kuban.

But Fast was not alone in such an appraisal. When administrator David Friesen ordered the individual villages to strike the Brethren from their civil registers, thus thwarting Claassen's resettlement efforts, the demand was not carried out. P.M. Friesen records the decisive factor that "Claassen had earned certain sympathies as a trailblazer through his success in the land question in Petersburg and the Caucasus."²

The significance of theology as biography is increasingly recognized in the contemporary church. This attempt to assess the role of a trailblazer is biographical in nature. The following five "portraits" focus on his contribution in agribusiness, education, as a churchman, as a politician and as a brother.

I. A Mennonite Agri-Businessman

Having apprenticed with Johann Cornies on the Juschanlee experimental farm, young Claassen gained some valuable experience in wholesaling products from the Molotschna colony to cities like Melitopol and Berdjansk. He therefore quite naturally established a business partnership with Cornelius Reimer, whose sister Katharina later became his wife. It appears that while Cornelius and a hired hand took care of the daily business routine in Liebenau, Johann became a wholesaler of grain to various port cities on the Black Sea.

His business acumen became evident when he established a brick factory and lumber mill in order to finance the building of the *Bruderschule*. When the young Mennonite Brethren Church experienced oppression in 1860, he decided to go to Petersburg for help. In answer to his question whether the necessary finances were available for travel, he received an affirmative reply.³ This would indicate that their business was developing a healthy profit. How much of his own money Claassen donated for the cause of the Brethren during his twenty-month stay in the capital would be difficult to ascertain. That he was liberal in his giving would be quite in character. When he submitted a request for reimbursement of some sixty silver rubles for business expenses, and some of the brethren balked at the amount, he retorted: "He who loves his silver rubles more than his freedom does not fit into our proceedings."⁴ At any rate, it is clear that he dipped heavily into his own pocket, not only for room and board, but also for such expenses as secretarial fees for his various petitions.⁵ How much the several treks to Petersburg, and later to the Caucasus cost him in lost business, one can only guess. However, it must be noted that when the urgent request to return from Kuban to the Molotschna came in the spring of 1865, the once wealthy businessman had no money to travel.⁶ A letter stating that he read *Job* and was strengthened on New Year's Day in 1862⁷ implies that he identified with that rich man who had lost everything.

During the establishment of the Kuban settlement, the differences in agricultural productivity of the Molotschna and the northern Caucasus became apparent. Following

Cornies' model, Claassen developed an experimental farm where he tried alternatives to the staple grains common to the Ukraine bread-basket. In addition, he established a nursery which supplied young trees for the settler. Already in the spring of 1865, the Russian Major Sabuzky awarded Claassen and Reimer twenty-seven acres of additional land each for further experimental work. Soon new crops such as grapes, flax and mustard were successfully introduced. Cattle and sheep industries improved through new methods of breeding and settlers were encouraged to develop the poultry industry. Apparently the official awards he received in the early seventies accrued to him for distinguished service in agriculture at the Kuban settlement.⁸ He challenged his brethren with, "It is self-evident that we must be model farmers in return for all of the imperial privileges!"⁹ The fact that he later owned two full farms at the Kuban would indicate that, like Job, the Lord again blessed him with wealth.

II. A Promoter of Education

Although Johann Cornies had initiated major reforms in elementary schools,¹⁰ secondary education was in the hands of the privileged few. Sensing an urgent need, Claassen and his brother-in-law Jakob Reimer, along with several others in the Gnadenfeld Mennonite Church decided to establish a *Bruderschule*, a high school to provide strong Christian training for their own children as well as gifted orphans and children of the poor. Thus, as Friesen puts it, Joahnn Claassen "stood in the forefront of this venture, giving freely of his time, money, inspiration and strength."¹¹ Because their religious ideals for the school were paramount, Claassen and Reimer withdrew their support when Heinrich Franz, who apparently had little sympathy for their "Pietistic tendencies," was appointed as teacher. Whether Claassen should be complimented for his idealism or censured for narrowmindedness could be debated.¹² However, the concern for religious education surfaced again when Claassen and Reimer founded an *Armenschule* (school for the poor) to serve non-Mennonite German settlers north of the Molotschna. Unfortunately, those efforts had to be abandoned when the problems facing

the new Mennonite Brethren Church in early 1860 demanded their attention. Claassen's interest in education, nevertheless, surfaced again while he was in Petersburg. When Gerhard Wieler was dismissed from his teaching position in Liebenau because he had joined the Brethren, Johann encouraged Katharina to petition for him as a private tutor of their children, based on his ability to offer instruction in the Russian language, which was lacking in the Liebenau village school.¹³ Such an approach to progressive education was all too rare, since few people in the closed Mennonite colonies considered the acquiring of the Russian language to be an asset, let alone a necessity. Later, when the Kuban settlement was founded, Johann saw to it that each village built its own schoolhouse. No doubt the twenty-four year tenure of David Johann Claassen¹⁴ at the Wohldemfuerst secondary school can be attributed in large measure to his father's interest and encouragement.

III. A Lay Churchman

a. An Ecumenical Churchman

Although he refused to be a candidate for ordination, Johann Claassen was an ecumenical churchman throughout his adult life. During his early work for Johann Cornies, the secretary-treasurer for the local branch of the Bible Society, Claassen was exposed to ecumenical Christians through the meetings of that group.¹⁵ Cornies chaired the local "literary" or reading society, and managed their 355-volume library. Young Claassen may well have passed some of the long hours travelling for Cornies by reading books from that library. When the library was dissolved after Cornies' death,¹⁶ Claassen no doubt will have acquired some of his favorite volumes from that collection. He later supported Mennonite itinerant evangelists and colporteurs like Jacob Bekker both financially and with a supply of Bibles from the Bible Society.¹⁷

One wonders whether P.M. Friesen's critique that the Mennonite Brethren in South Russia "load their bookshelves with the works of Lutherans, the Reformed, Baptists, Methodists, Moravian Brethren, etc., among

which a Mennonite work must always be a valuable rarity"¹⁸ would be aimed at Claassen as well. On the other hand, it must be noted that Claassen endorsed the "Founding Document" which quoted Menno Simons' *Foundation of Christian Doctrine*. Johann quoted these passages from Menno on other occasions as well, though at least once, it seems that the quotation was not accurate.¹⁹ Other Mennonite books in circulation in southern Russia were *The Wandering Soul* and *Martyrs Mirror*, as well as the Confession of Faith first published in West Prussia in 1660, which the Mennonite Brethren claimed as their own.²⁰

Baptist literature influenced the Mennonite Brethren, and specifically Johann Claassen through several channels. His brother-in-law, Jakob Reimer, became interested in baptism by immersion through reading the biography of Anna Judson, a Baptist.²¹ A booklet on immersion which Johann had obtained from the Baptists in Petersburg helped convince Jacob Bekker to use that mode.²² The fact that Mennonite Brethren fondly referred to Christian Schmidt as their "Spurgeon"²³ indicates that they read many sermons of this contemporary Baptist minister.

The Bible study hours (*Bibelstunden*), as well as the child dedication practiced by the Gnadenfeld Mennonite Church, and later by the Mennonite Brethren, can be traced to the Moravian Brethren.²⁴ The sermons of a Lutheran Pietist, Ludwig Hofacker, awakened the conscience of many a Mennonite of that era. How strong that influence was on early Mennonite Brethren like Claassen and Heinrich Huebert is attested by the nicknames "Lutheran Mennonites" and "Moravians." More specifically, because of the intimate associations with Pastor Eduard Wuest, they were sometimes called "Wuest Brethren."²⁵ When Johann traveled to Petersburg and Reval in the interests of the *Bruderschule*, he stopped at Tula to foster intimate ecumenical relations with such "brethren" as the Lutheran Pastor Landesén, whom he had probably met at Wuest's mission festivals.²⁶ Visiting settlements as far removed as Odessa together with Jakob Reimer and Wilhelm Bartel will certainly have involved many believers of non-Mennonite church backgrounds.²⁷

Membership in the young Mennonite Brethren Church

did not necessitate cutting ties with other "brethren." In one of the footnotes Friesen indicates that Claassen fellowshiped with other Mennonite believers in Petersburg, for which he was duly reprimanded by his more narrow-minded brethren.²⁸ During part of his stay there he found lodging as well as fellowship with a Baptist tailor, Plonus. The visit also occasioned a stimulating debate about immersion. Pastor Nielsen of the Moravian Brethren is listed as one of his valuable advisors. Claassen roomed with Otto Forchhammer who was of Danish extraction and worked for the interdenominational Bible Society. On several occasions they observed communion together. On New Year's Day, 1862, he fellowshiped around the Word with Privy Councillor Brun and another gentleman," probably also of high government rank. The Van Ark family from the Dutch church provided the "most congenial company," and Claassen refers to Madam Nordbeck and others from various denominations as "brothers and sisters."²⁹

When P.M. Friesen assesses whether the ideal of brotherhood was realized in the early Mennonite Brethren Church, he censures the brethren for being "thick of head and narrow of heart." But he held that Claassen had a genuine consciousness of brotherhood. "In Petersburg he practiced such fellowship with the Mennonites there as well as with the Baptists in Tiflis. At the Ovetschka, in spite of everything that had happened in the 'Brotherhood School' and the 'secession quarrels' between him and Nikolai Schmidt, he had intimate fellowship with the latter . . ." (now a leader of the Templers).³⁰ In the Kuban settlement, which had originally been planned for Mennonite Brethren, Johann welcomed and cooperated with people from the Temple Church, also known as the "Friends of Jerusalem," as well as Mennonites from the "Kirchliche" group.

b. A Leader of the Brethren

Claassen's most important contribution as a churchman was undoubtedly made in the organization of the Mennonite Brethren Church. Though he had not initiated the informal communion at Elisabeththal which eventually precipitated the secession of the brethren, Heinrich Franz regarded him

as the ringleader and challenged him to take his followers along out of the church.³¹ It therefore seems natural that Johann was appointed one of the three legal representatives when the new group was organized. Thus his name appears in all the early lists of signatures on statements the brethren submitted to the authorities. After having made the fateful mistake of promising not to make any religious moves without the express consent of the authorities (Feb. 10, 1860), he refused to accept nomination for the ministry and even withdrew from the election.³² However, he evidently revised the heading on the report that was sent to the administrative office.³³ A comparison of the revised title with Heinrich Huebert's original reveals that Claassen had an excellent grasp of acceptable legal terminology current in Mennonite circles. Even while he was in Petersburg, the Molotschna brethren still regarded him as their leader. When the question of baptizing a former Lutheran came up, someone suggested that Claassen should be consulted before they proceed, although the time lag involved in correspondence made that quite impractical.

Both the in-group and those who opposed the brethren acknowledged Claassen's leadership in the young church. Writing about the plans of the local authorities to suppress the movement, Heinrich Huebert relates that "Claassen, who was the leader of our concern, was to be imprisoned. Then—the colony leadership hoped—the whole matter could be resolved in two weeks."³⁴ In a similar vein Friesen declares that Claassen was a "decisive factor in the church and the actual leader in the heat of the battle."³⁵ Immediately after the secession, when Elder Lenzmann wanted to be reconciled with the brethren, he sought out Claassen, though the attempt was aborted by the opposition. Later, in a letter to Editor Mannhardt of the *Mennonitische Blaetter*, he refers to the young church simply as "Claassen and associates."³⁶ Lutheran Pastor Dobbert from Prischib uses the phrases "Claassen and his following" or "followers," "Claassen and his companions," "Claassen's party," and even "the Claassen movement."³⁷ It is interesting to note that he gives Claassen credit for authoring the document of organization,³⁸ though Cornelissen wrote the initial draft. Claassen had specifically instruc-

ted him to write the document, and no doubt suggested its basic content. It was big-hearted diplomacy on his part to have Cornelissen's name appear as author.

The fact that he was a layman did not prevent Claassen from engaging in evangelistic ministries. In Petersburg he and Forchhammer conducted informal Bible studies with German tradesmen. "We told them . . . that we were not pastors but that we had experienced the grace of God in our hearts, and this we hoped for them too." ³⁹ When he undertook to teach the stable boy and cleaning maid to read, using the Gospels, the motive was undoubtedly evangelistic as well as educational. Johann's visits to the services in the Liebenau schoolhouse in January 1863, where he gave an informal evangelistic appeal after the benediction, got him into trouble with the local authorities. In response to the question as to who had authorized him to preach, he appealed to Menno Simons, who held that "a person has the right to teach even though he may not have been called by men." ⁴⁰

Claassen's most noteworthy accomplishments in churchmanship were made in the area of counseling and reconciliation. His letter of June 18, 1861, admonishing the exuberant as well as the reasonable ⁴¹ demonstrates a masterful diplomacy. When he returned from Petersburg in 1862, he set the example by communicating with persons on both sides of the issue, though Benjamin Bekker and Gerhard Wieler bitterly accused him of "forcing reconciliation with W. Bartel, Heinrich Bartel, Abraham Cornelissen and others." ⁴² His rebaptism at that time was no doubt a move to appease the immersionists, even though he had experienced believers baptism in the Mennonite Church.

To combat the jealousy and strife that threatened to devastate the brotherhood in the new Kuban settlement late in 1864, Johann Claassen and Deacon Peters undertook an extended counseling tour. Nephew Johann reported that Claassen went "to help in correcting disorder. When he returned in a week, he was completely joyous and encouraged. With a glad heart he reported what the dear Savior had done to the brothers and sisters, how all

disorder had been ended, and how they now had a warm relationship." ⁴³

Claassen no doubt faced his most difficult assignment in churchmanship in the summer of 1865 (May 4 — July 20), which climaxed in the "June Reforms" that dealt with one of the most thorny issues—excessive emotionalism. To what extent Johann promoted such excesses is not clear. Friesen records that "Claassen himself never went beyond a happy facial expression and shouting Hallelujah, and always kept a simple, friendly and joyful dignity." ⁴⁴ But his appraisal of Claassen's significance indicates that "he did promote emotional fanaticism for a time in a manner I still cannot understand. . . . That Claassen could go along with Kappes against Wuest (ca 1858) is something that can never be forgiven a historical figure like him." ⁴⁵ The reference to shouting for joy appended to the June 1865 minutes begins in a similar vein:

Claassen clung with fanatical determination to these childish practices which had already become orthodox ritual. . . . If Claassen could not rid himself of the notion that one cannot do without jumping and shouting in holy enthusiasm, nor ought to, then that is but his "blind spot" which he got from imitating Wuest's leapers. . . . Claassen continued to hold fast to the necessity of this sort of expression as one of the most naive amongst them all, "until things became too gross even for him." (Diary of Jakob Reimer, July 4, 1865) ⁴⁶

Abraham Unger implies that the situation would not have become as critical had Claassen already resided at the Kuban. He states, "I believe that the Lord will restore many things through him." When Claassen visited the Chortitza settlement, he dealt only with the "joyous" brethren, which Unger considered to be wise foresight. Word reached the older settlement that in the Molotschna, Claassen "has overturned everything, and forgiveness has been asked of those who had been excommunicated, while those who are removed from office have been reinstated. Other foolishness, such as drums and dancing . . . has been ended, and the friendly, brotherly attitude toward those of a different opinion restored." ⁴⁷

Friesen's overall assessment of that feat of churchmanship reads as follows:

Finally the serious and moderate party . . . succeeded in restoring order under Claassen's leadership.⁴⁸ Had anyone tried to institute a more radical reform in connection with the jumping and shouting, and in terms of firm conference decisions than Claassen himself wished, the whole work of reform in the summer of 1865 would most certainly have come to nothing at all. On the one hand, Claassen was accepted by Abraham Unger, Daniel Fast, and Abraham Cornelssen, and on the other hand also enjoyed the complete confidence of men such as Benjamin Becker and Heinrich Neufeld, and both sides could respect his innate honesty and purity. His sympathetic manner, his warm "love for the brethren," his ability to be flexible and gentle like a fine diplomat, yet always for the supreme purpose of discovering God's will only, and to fulfill it, made him, in the hands of God, into the savior of the M.B. Church. That the consequences of the "June Reforms" were more far-reaching than the wording of the minutes and sharper in their effect than had been intended is typical of such situations. They were sharper than Br. Claassen wished them to be, since he was a man who always dealt with a soft touch in church matters. . . .⁴⁹

IV. An Adept Politician

Johann Claassen's finesse as a politician comes to the fore in his negotiations with government authorities. His first effort in that arena seems to have been the acquiring of the permit for the *Bruderschule*. Although he had to make two trips to Petersburg to achieve recognition, he became acquainted with many government officials.

Claassen's major political efforts, however, were made on behalf of the young Mennonite Brethren Church. His first journey to the capital netted only the advice that they elect ministers. The second mission to Petersburg became more complex. Internal strife in a settlement, he was warned, could jeopardize one's privileges. But how could the oppression of the Brethren be relieved without revealing the oppressors? He soon learned to ask for land to alleviate

overcrowding rather than request recognition for a newly formed church.⁵⁰ Both his letters and those of Otto Forchhammer reveal the complexity of his maneuvering. An impressive summary of his contacts with dignitaries is found in a letter to Katharina. There he mentions privy councillors, a cabinet minister, doctor, colonel, assistant minister and major generals.⁵¹

Apparently the Molotschna Brethren had confidence in Claassen's ability and certified him as their deputy in legal negotiations. In turn, Johann communicated with them about prospective land grants, wisely involving them in the decision-making process, even if it prolonged his stay. Personal sacrifice was a prerequisite for politicians, their wives and families even in those days.

Claassen was also an adept politician in relationship with the Molotschna administrative officers. A good example would be the "Peace Proposal"⁵² he sent from Petersburg, requesting his visa and certification as deputy. It consists of a strong request laced with emotional appeal, a defense of his actions, an interesting appraisal of the positive results in case their response would be affirmative, as well as an outline of the procedure he would expect.

Johann's petition to the Tsar,⁵³ with its supporting documents, also constitutes a masterpiece of diplomacy. But success at the capital only opened the door to the next stage: negotiations with the Caucasian authorities. This time he served as deputy for both the Molotschna and Chortitza brethren.⁵⁴ Five journeys to Stavropol or Tiflis, all by four-legged horsepower, the final one lasting seven months, would involve more taxing shuttle diplomacy than most modern politicians could endure.

However, Claassen also experienced the negative effects of politics. Wilhelm Bartel compared him to Moses and predicted the ingratitude he would reap.⁵⁵ For instance, when the last guarantee of Mennonite privileges was to be worked out with the government in Tiflis, Johann lacked the money to travel. Instead of supporting him financially, the Molotschna brothers and sisters expressed their unhappiness with his "inactivity," while the Chortitza group "would have approved the removal of his authority."⁵⁶ Nevertheless, Johann summarized the

situation as follows: "If matters concerning the authorities arose, you knew very well where to find me; also when land had to be measured. And when help was needed with money, etc., I was also expected to provide a solution."⁵⁷ On rare occasions, however, he did receive letters of encouragement. On June 18, 1863, Benjamin Becker wrote:

Dear brother, do remain in good spirits and do not become discouraged . . . as you work for the Lord and the brethren, for your reward in heaven will be great. We can never repay you for the good you are doing on our behalf. . . . Here, dear brother, we want to show compassion to your wife and children and . . . see that they will be well looked after. . . .⁵⁸

V. A Humble Brother

The judgment of the critic tends to be harsh in the heat of the encounter. It is therefore instructive to notice that Heinrich Franz chided Claassen for being "an honest man" when at the same time he moved to expel the brethren from the Gnadenfeld church.⁵⁹ On the other hand, what an individual does and says about himself often reveals his true character. After Johann and the other two brethren had signed the fateful statement of February 10, they judged themselves publicly "for their false move" by declining the nomination to office and abstaining in the election process.⁶⁰ Few persons would have imposed this severe a penance on themselves in the face of such popular demand.

Extensive travels on behalf of the brotherhood involved lengthy absences from family and friends. On one such occasion Claassen had already been separated from his family for nine long months when a brother complained about the incurred expenditures. Johann confided in Katharina that he feared the entire effort might be in vain, but "that makes me humble, which is precisely what a stubborn fellow like me needs. . . . The main issue for me shall be to save my soul."⁶¹ Humility and trust seem to have prompted the statement that "It is God's grace that during the time I have been away it has pleased Him to give you His Spirit in even greater measure."⁶² When the

Kuban church received a smarting admonition from Benjamin Bekker, Claassen sent a humble reply. "We had a day of fasting in our congregation. . . . The brethren should not think that we are forming a separate church here. . . . Nor have we despised the letters; rather we have humbled ourselves."⁶³ The Claassen home was open for the meetings of the brethren, whether they owned a fine home, as in Liebenau, or a shack that didn't even have doors and windows.⁶⁴ Even when he lived in dire poverty at the Kuban, Johann could be content, look ahead and affirm "I like this place." Repeatedly he acknowledged his humanness and absolute dependence on God. "Now I am supposed to give advice, but I have none. I know that the Lord still lives, and in His time He will help according to His good will."⁶⁵ On April 19, 1866, he wrote from Tiflis, "I have served you to the best of my knowledge, and have worked for your best as I understood it. I do not mean to imply that I have not made mistakes, for I am human and beset by weakness."⁶⁶

In a letter to Katharina one senses the agony of prolonged separation:

Often I wonder why this lot has fallen to me. Why does the Lord not distribute the load? Why must I be the one who is always far away from his family? I also tell my Lord about this situation, and ask Him to remember that I am dust and ashes. I tell my Lord that I am human, that I have a heart filled with longing. You have given me a wife, and I may not embrace her. You have given me children, and I may not instruct them. My infant child I do not even know. My wife has a husband, but she must bear the burdens alone; the children have a father, but the little ones know him not.⁶⁷

Even the financial outlook seemed dark, he wrote, "Nonetheless we believe that a door will be opened, so that I will be able to do what the church has required of me. Just what is going to happen, I do not know. God has a solution for all problems."⁶⁸

At the time when excessive emotionalism had run rampant both in Chortitza and Molotschna, Claassen was

able to stem the tide. The report from Chortitza states that "Since Claassen was a gifted and respected man, his words made a powerful impression upon these brethren." Though they were slow to accept his advice, they were eventually left "with little choice but to confess that they too were in the wrong."⁶⁹

Despite the hostility that developed between some of the early Brethren and the Mennonite Church, tension lessened after the reforms of 1865. Claassen had maintained cordial relations with persons in the Mennonite Church, and his "success in the land issue in the Kuban had won him much sympathy."⁷⁰

VI. Assessing the Measure of a Man

Johann Claassen was acknowledged to be a leader and a trailblazer by many of his contemporaries. He was "an enthusiastic admirer and faithful emulator of Cornies in all cultural endeavors. . . . Next to the Christian faith, model farming and good schools were his ideals in life."⁷¹ At one point, the various villagers did not carry out the orders of the administrative office against the Brethren because they respected Claassen's "success in the land question."⁷² When Herman Fast went to Petersburg to obtain land for the landless Molotschna Mennonites in the late 1860's, he found his task to be easier because of Claassen's prior efforts in that arena. Repeatedly he referred to Johann as "a trailblazer for justice and freedom."⁷³

Johann Claassen's greatest contribution, however, is undoubtedly embodied in the Mennonite Brethren Church. Administrative officers like David Friesen, Mennonite elders like August Lenzmann, as well as Lutheran clergy such as Pastor Dobbert from settlements on the east bank of the Molotschna River, considered Johann Claassen to be the leader of the Brethren.

More important, however, is the fact that his own brethren regarded him as their leader. Before paying him highest compliments, historian P.M. Friesen cites him for several errors of judgment:

The action on February 10 was decisively and profoundly detrimental especially because through it, Cornelissen and Claassen did not get the positions for which they were suited. Others, who were not sufficiently endowed, assumed those positions and had to relinquish them only after they and the church had suffered considerable harm, as we know. And this remains so, despite Claassen's wise and humble, and surely honestly intended explanation before the election: Whether they elected us three, or whether we simply worked as brethren in the church, is immaterial. (Why then did God appoint apostles, pastors, teachers, etc., in the church, if it is all the same?) And since we were among the first to secede, this will keep us from becoming proud. This was a weak justification of a promise given in a moment of faintheartedness. . . .⁷⁴

The fact that he did not stem the tide of emotional fanaticism for some time is unforgiveable, according to Friesen, even if some writers asserted that the "most essential service" rendered by Claassen and Jakob Reimer was subduing that movement.⁷⁵

In spite of these flaws, Friesen's assessment of the trailblazer for the Brethren is still the most accurate:

As surely as David, Hezekiah, Luther and Menno belong among the greatest of the world's men, so surely Claassen belongs among the greatest men in Russian Mennonite society, and for the Mennonite Brethren Church is no less a figure than is Zinzendorf for the Moravian Brethren.

Claassen is a much greater man than you make him out to be. I say that, convinced that I know him best in all his weaknesses, but also in the totality of his intellectual stature, that is, through the gigantic literary legacy (gigantic for a farmer, even though very intelligent), in the way he borders on the childish and the exalted in a biblical kind of open-heartedness, even when that open-heartedness turns out to his disadvantage (for the status of his person). It is my conviction that the greatest men in our society (if one may speak of greatness in our microscopic Mennonite world) are

Johann Cornies, Johann Claassen and Bernhard Harder. Cornies' achievement embraces Mennonite agriculture and education, Harder's achievement the present Mennonite pulpit, and Claassen's achievement—our Brethren Church, which I, despite all the criticism which I have directed at it from time to time (and which I do not retract), consider to be the salvation of Mennonitism in its purely Christian significance and its final purpose. There were better educated men, more gifted men, men of greater personality, men who at first glance were more impressive than the two latter ones, but there was no one who had this insight in such depth and breadth, who had this commitment to a concept, and what is most important—who left such large footprints for us to follow.⁷⁶

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FOOTNOTES

- 1 P.M. Friesen, *Die Alt-Evangelische Mennonitische Bruederschaft in Russland (1789-1910)* (Halbstadt: Raduga, 1911) translated as *The Mennonite Brotherhood in Russia (1789-1910)* (Winnipeg 1978), p. 253, note 54, p. 1002. Quotations are taken from the new translation with some revision by the writers, since the footnotes were not yet available at the time of writing.
- 2 *Ibid.*, p. 407, note 182, p. 1011. For a biographical account of Claassen's contributions see Elizabeth S. Klasen, *Trailblazer for the Brethren* (Scottsdale, Pa., 1978).
- 3 Friesen, *Mennonite Brotherhood*, p. 342.
- 4 *Ibid.*, pp. 368-369.
- 5 Friesen's original German, p. 312, mentions expenses of 99 Kopeks daily—which is missing on p. 368 of the new translation.
- 6 *Ibid.*, p. 429.
- 7 *Ibid.*, p. 371.
- 8 *Ibid.*, p. 474.
- 9 *Ibid.*, p. 199.
- 10 Franz Isaac, *Die Molotschnaer Mennoniten* (Halbstadt, Taurien, 1909), pp. 273-293 give Cornies' "Comparisons of School X and A," "Rules for Handling Children," as well as curriculum.
- 11 Freisen, *Mennonite Brotherhood*, p. 105.
- 12 *Ibid.*, p. 108.
- 13 *Ibid.*, p. 374.
- 14 Dietrich J. Claassen, *History of the Classen Family* (Bakersfield, 1946), p. 8, states that he was generally known as David Invanovitch.
- 15 Friesen, *Mennonite Brotherhood*, p. 193.
- 16 H. Goerz, *Die Molotschnaer Ansiedlung* (Steinbach, Man., 1950/1951), p. 37.
- 17 Jacob P. Bekker, *Origin of the Mennonite Brethren Church* (Hillsboro, Kansas, 1973), p. 38.

- 18 Friesen, *Mennonite Brotherhood*, p. 38, cf. p. 47.
- 19 *Ibid.*, pp. 400, 408, 369.
- 20 *Ibid.*, pp. 130, 133 cf. *Mennonite Encyclopedia* I:683, cf. A.J. Klassen, "The Mennonite Brethren Confessions of Faith," (unpubl. S.T.M. thesis), Vancouver: Union College, 1965.
- 21 Friesen, *Mennonite Brotherhood*, p. 286.
- 22 Bekker, *Origin*, p. 71.
- 23 John A. Toews, *A History of the Mennonite Brethren Church* (Fresno, Calif., 1975), p. 70.
- 24 Friesen, *Mennonite Brotherhood*, pp. 73-74, 101.
- 25 *Ibid.*, pp. 179, 281, 100, 104.
- 26 *Ibid.*, p. 106. For further details regarding ecumenical relationships see A.J. Klassen, "Ecumenical Relations of the Early Mennonite Brethren," *Journal of Church and Society*, 4:46-56 (Spring, 1968), based on his M.A. thesis, "The Roots and Development of M.B. Theology" (Wheaton College Graduate School).
- 27 Friesen, *Mennonite Brotherhood*, p. 207.
- 28 *Ibid.*, p. 265, note 73, p. 1003.
- 29 *Ibid.*, p. 371.
- 30 *Ibid.*, p. 456, with some changes.
- 31 *Ibid.*, p. 229.
- 32 *Ibid.*, p. 343, note 136, p. 1009.
- 33 *Ibid.*, p. 343.
- 34 *Ibid.*, p. 342, note 134, p. 1008.
- 35 *Ibid.*, p. 343, note 136, p. 1009.
- 36 *Ibid.*, p. 382.
- 37 *Ibid.*, pp. 386, 387, 390.
- 38 *Ibid.*, p. 386.
- 39 *Ibid.*, p. 370.
- 40 *Ibid.*, p. 400.
- 41 *Ibid.*, pp. 268-270.
- 42 *Ibid.*, p. 275 cf. 272, note 79, p. 1004.
- 43 *Ibid.*, p. 426.
- 44 *Ibid.*, p. 417, note 194, p. 1012.
- 45 *Ibid.*, pp. 501-502, cf. p. 416. "It must also be admitted that Claassen did not act with sufficient clear-sightedness, clarity and energy in this matter. This seems

almost incomprehensible in view of the clear and balanced vision he demonstrated in other spiritual and civil matters."

- 46 *Ibid.*, pp 441-442 cf. pp. 268-270; June 18, 1861 he recommended they do without.
- 47 *Ibid.*, p. 436.
- 48 *Ibid.*, p. 275.
- 49 *Ibid.*, pp. 442-443.
- 50 *Ibid.*, p. 258, note 58, p. 1003.
- 51 *Ibid.*, p. 367.
- 52 *Ibid.*, p. 363-364.
- 53 *Ibid.*, pp. 345-354.
- 54 *Ibid.*, p. 412.
- 55 *Ibid.*, p. 248.
- 56 *Ibid.*, p. 414.
- 57 *Ibid.*
- 58 *Ibid.*, p. 405.
- 59 *Ibid.*, p. 229.
- 60 *Ibid.*, p. 242 cf. 342, n. 136, p. 1009.
- 61 *Ibid.*, p. 369.
- 62 *Ibid.*, p. 370.
- 63 *Ibid.*, p. 429.
- 64 *Ibid.*, p. 425.
- 65 *Ibid.*, p. 426.
- 66 *Ibid.*, p. 414.
- 67 *Ibid.*, p. 415.
- 68 Letter of March 12, 1865, *ibid.*, p. 430.
- 69 *Ibid.*, p. 326.
- 70 *Ibid.*, p. 454.
- 71 *Ibid.*, p. 502, note 300, p. 1018.
- 72 *Ibid.*, p. 407, note 182, p. 1011.
- 73 *Ibid.*, p. 252, note 54, p. 1002.
- 74 *Ibid.*, p. 343, note 136, p. 1009.
- 75 *Ibid.*, p. 501 cf. pp. 456-457.
- 76 *Ibid.*, p. 502.

P. M. FRIESEN THE HISTORIAN

Abraham Friesen

We Mennonites have often expressed our thinly-veiled contempt for the scholar's profession in more subtle ways than did the area administrative officer who, on the occasion P. M. Friesen received the commission to write his history, remarked: "That is a nice piece of work exactly suited for Friesen. But he will also earn handsomely from it, for he will complete it in fourteen days!" The officer's obvious implication was that scholars do not really work; at the same time, they are vastly overpaid for whatever it is they do. We have come a long way since then, however, for when J. A. Toews was recently commissioned to write his history of the Mennonite Brethren Church, the Board of Christian Literature magnanimously gave him a full year! P. M. Friesen (and I really do not think that the P. M. had anything to do with the delay!) recalled the remark of the area administrator some twenty-five years later in the introduction to his history when that *magnum opus* finally rolled off the press and he was preparing to meet his maker. Although Friesen was modest enough at the time not to believe that he could accomplish the task in fourteen days, he did not think that it would take him twenty-five years. What had happened? Why the delay? And what about the finished product?

Friesen's most immediate problem seems to have been the fact that he was writing *Zeitgeschichte*. This confronted him with an apparent dilemma he described as follows in his introduction:

... I visited many 'old folks,' loving uncles and brothers. They contradicted one another: one said this, another that. They contradicted themselves: they narrated things differently than they were given in the minutes of meetings they had themselves signed, differently than their own letters and 'reports' (given to me by themselves or through the Rueckenau Church

Council). In a period of ten-to-twenty-five years (indeed, in one-to-five years!) traditions regarding these events had developed in rural areas which interpreted the events the way they wished them to have happened! And they were quite honest in all this. Nor was there any difference between those belonging to the Mennonite Church or the 'brethren' in this regard. Under these circumstances it was not easy to write in opposition to the 'common brother' [who had suggested that P. M. Friesen should prove 'them' wrong and 'us' right] and in line with father Reimer's principle of truth. Emotions and historical conscience came into severe conflict. Time and again I listened to dozens of honorable men and women from the various factions and read and reread their documents—and a great sorrow overcame me! I could impossibly present loving old men of this or that faction in all their nakedness in a cold-blooded fashion during their lifetime, a nakedness of which they had themselves been unaware. Indeed, as I shall elaborate below in the delineation of my historical procedure, it became very difficult for me to treat men from the fellowship, who had already been in their graves for fifty years, in a truthful historical fashion: all of them have left a circle of admirers behind who see them in the light of a pious tradition. Their children and grandchildren live in our midst. To write contemporary history is a difficult task for one's psyche!¹

To avoid being forced to take hold of one or the other of the horns of this dilemma (i.e., either be dishonest or cold-bloodedly lay bare the truth), Friesen turned to the task of organizing the materials he possessed into a kind of documentary chronicle of events. When this was accomplished, he left Halbstadt, moving to the Kuban, Odessa, and Sevastopol, collecting and organizing his materials on the way. Eight years in Odessa and thirteen in Sevastopol were spent in this manner. Whereas the material at first oppressed him, as he proceeded one gets the impression that it began to overwhelm him. As any historian knows, the easiest part of his task is the collection of material; the difficult part is its digestion. The temptation to go on

collecting interminably is vividly brought to mind by the story, contained in the obituary column of an Eastern newspaper some years ago, reporting the death of a college professor who had been killed in an aeroplane crash on one of his many research trips—gathering material for his doctoral dissertation some twenty-five years after having completed his residency requirements. To a certain degree, P. M. Friesen fell prey to this temptation as a way to escape the troubling task of destroying pious traditions while, as he put it in another place, “the graves were not old enough to be opened calmly and in cold blood.”² He could not bring himself to unmask the idealized version of history—on both sides of the quarrel—and lay bare the less than flattering reality. And so he sought solace in gathering and organizing his massive materials. Some have called this providential since it resulted in the vast amount of source material contained both in the documentary supplements, as well as in his own narrative sections. Being a mere *profane* historian, I cannot presume to know about such things. But I do know that as a well-integrated, comprehensive history, Friesen’s study suffers as a result.

The original material collected by Friesen is contained especially in those chapters beginning with Section D, the section on the origins of the M. B. Church in Russia. The earlier sections, especially those dealing with general Mennonite history prior to the emigration to Russia, rely largely on secondary sources. But they manifest some of the same characteristics of the subsequent chapters. Rather than digesting his material, Friesen begins this first part with extensive quotations on the origin of the Anabaptist movement from Reischwitz and Wadzeck’s *Beitraege zur Kenntnis der Mennoniten-Gemeinden in Europa und Amerika*, which he follows with Menno Simons’ “Withdrawal from the Catholic Church” and excerpts from some of his other writings. From Menno he moves to Johannes Deknatel and *The Martyrs Mirror*.³ The same is true of many of the later parts. The kind of history this leads to is graphically illustrated in Friesen’s own introductory words to the chapter on “The Spiritual Character of the Churches and Clergy” at the end of the book: “. . . we want to try to describe the spiritual character and development of the

churches and their ministers in the important period from 1860 to 1910 by presenting a few biographies and discourses, as well as other accomplishments of the ministers."⁴ The same can be said of the chapter on missions, as the one on intellectual and cultural matters.⁵ Consequently, we have a series of vignettes, sermons, anecdotes, but not a comprehensive, synthetic interpretation of the subjects.

Whereas much of the earlier material comes from secondary sources, much of the material for the second half of the book comes from reports sent in to Friesen by various people. And very little of either is critically evaluated. In the section from about page 200 to 500, however, we have the meat and potatoes—the documents Friesen collected, largely relating to the schism of 1860. Whereas he “freely” uses many of the reports sent in to him, as he quite candidly admits—for example: “freely adapted from Brother Heinrich Epp’s ‘Reports’ and the author’s personal recollections”—we become a little more concerned when Friesen does this in the very heart of his book, as he does on occasion. A case in point is the following remark: “This church [Kronsweide] had a unique and independent historical development which we will present according to the careful ‘accounts’ of Brother Heinrich Epp, Andreasfeld, which he wrote for the above-mentioned ‘History of the Mennonite Brethren Church’ of January 6, 1885. We will use letters and notes written by the brethren: Elder Abram Unger and Elder Aron Lepp. (We abbreviate freely without indicating omissions.)”⁶ So we cannot really rely on the fact that Friesen has always given us the material in as pure a form as possible. And does he always tell us when he has “abbreviated freely without indicating omissions?” Even where he does use quotation marks and we can assume that he has given us a verbatim rendering, we must ask ourselves: has he left anything out? And if so, why? Furthermore, on what basis did he select the material he has included? What were the questions he asked of the documents when he made his selections? For perhaps, just perhaps, what Friesen has left out might now—as the result of a different set of questions, a different perspective on the part of the historian—appear as

important as what he has incorporated. That Friesen asked many of the same questions of his evidence we would today goes without saying. And yet the evidence he incorporated is the direct result of his interests, not necessarily ours. For with the passage of time we have not only gained a somewhat different perspective on those events—which is virtually inevitable—but the interests of the historian himself has broadened incredibly over the last thirty or so years. And so we have reason to temper our elation somewhat over the amount of original material contained in Friesen's history. Perhaps providence was not quite as providential in this instance as some have thought.

One of the reasons why Friesen presents so much of the original material is obviously to allow it to speak for him in dealing with an issue that appears to him—for reasons given earlier—too hot to handle. The other reason is that he regards this kind of evidence as nearly impossible to misinterpret. In the introductory remarks to the section dealing with the schism, he makes the following observation;

... The mass of material available for an 'inner' history both with regard to its light and dark aspects, is so surprisingly large that few of the contemporaries, who participated in and partially brought about these events, would believe it. A great number of letters, documents, diaries, 'reports,' 'memoirs,' etc. are available. The collection of letters (the ones he received as well as his own) left behind by Johann Classen of Liebenau, who died in the Kuban, is especially rich. These letters—as accurate as photographs—of persons who, differing in their persuasions, were involved in the brethren movement, characterize that movement better than even the official documents. . . .⁷

The phrase that strikes the historian is: "These letters—as accurate as photographs—." Now, it is quite true that the original sources are the best evidence, as the Renaissance scholars repeatedly informed their contemporaries. But written documents are never "as accurate as photographs." Irwin Panofsky once observed that until Leonardo da Vinci began to study and depict the human anatomy in his drawings through the newly discovered art of perspective,

medical techniques were lost with the practitioner when he died, even though he may have left a detailed written description behind.⁸ With regard to the interpretation of these documents, then, it appears to me that Friesen was overly sanguine. And he himself should have known this, for with regard to the interpretation of the essence of Mennonitism, he complained; "We have seen how infinitely variably—to the point of grotesque, mutually exclusive contradictions—sincere, believing, respected, well-educated Mennonite authorities—widely read men—who think deeply, can define the essence of Mennonitism."⁹

Along the same line, another somewhat disconcerting practice of Friesen is his penchant for attempting, on occasion, to resolve conflicting evidence by merely presenting both—or more—sides of an issue. In the section dealing with baptism, after delineating his own view *in extenso*, he remarks: "One should also hear the other side! Remaining true to this principle even in this matter is made possible through a letter . . . from Isaak Peters of America, a vehement opponent of baptism by immersion and . . . one of our foremost authorities on old Mennonite literature. . . ."¹⁰ now, this is a laudable principle to follow in historical scholarship, but the historian's obligation goes beyond simply presenting opposing positions. Like the jury—and ultimately the judge—he must evaluate the conflicting evidence, the arguments of the opposing lawyers, and arrive at some conclusion. It is at this juncture that his true task first begins, for, surely, truth does not lie at the opposite poles of an argument; nor, on the other hand, does it necessarily lie somewhere in between, as some historians, who have not done their homework, would have us believe. And even though 'however' or 'on the other hand' are favorite catchwords of the historical profession, the historian has an obligation to assess the varacity of the witness, determine the position from which he is speaking, and thus arrive at an evaluation of the evidence itself. This kind of analysis of the historical evidence is largely absent in Friesen—with notable exceptions where he is sure of himself, i.e., those parts of his book which treat the 1860 schism. There his judgments are balanced, his insights astute, and his perception by and large unerring.

Friesen himself recognized many of the shortcomings of his book. In his concluding chapter he wrote: "What we have written in the last sections of the book (indeed, in a large part of the book) is not 'history'; it is a statement of the subjective viewpoints of a contemporary; it is made up of 'chronicles' and 'memoirs' which will have to await the objective analysis of future historians. Nevertheless, the contemporary who reads these accounts will react to them according to his personal understanding or according to his sympathies or antipathies. Here, too, we desired to allow 'both sides' to speak."¹¹ It is our contention that Friesen could have done more in this regard to help his reader. For not only had he spent twenty-five years with the material, he was perhaps more eminently qualified to make the judgments he tried to avoid than anyone may ever be.

But I do not think we can let him off the hook even at this point. Had Friesen faced his responsibility as an historian immediately and had he set to work laying bare the "loving old men of this or that faction in all their nakedness in a cold-blooded fashion during their lifetime," he could have avoided many of his other organizational and procedural problems. Indeed, I believe the historian must insist that it is the obligation of every historian seriously interested in truth to do what Friesen postponed doing. Should we allow people to delude themselves, even if they do so piously? Do we not have an obligation to unmask even the most pious frauds of which we are all guilty? Why wait to do this until the guilty parties are in their graves? Just because people will react to, rather than learn from, such unmasking and condemn the historian—as Friesen was to learn after his book was published—does not excuse one from fulfilling his duty. I think we need to ask ourselves the same question Erasmus asked Martin Dorp when the theologians of his day objected to his edition of the Greek New Testament: "who is more indulgent to error, [he asked], the one who corrects and restores the mistakes, or the one who would sooner see a blunder added than removed, especially since it is in the nature of mistakes that one causes another?"¹² Surely it is better that we be made to face the truth about ourselves by the historian, no matter how painful that may be, than that we be allowed to

go to our graves having glossed over or piously reinterpreted our mistakes.

But on to the interpretive frame of reference of Friesen's study. One of the major components of this frame of reference is his ability to transcend narrow, confessional perspectives. To a certain degree, this characteristic undoubtedly derives from his "Alliance" leanings; to a certain extent it is based on his conviction that all human perception is relative, even theological perceptions and formulations. The former is illustrated in the following reference to the influence of the Moravian Brethren on the Russian Mennonites: "We have all benefitted from these blessings and thank God for this advance against 'confessional self-consciousness' by those dear old people of the Neumark! It was really an emerging awareness of the *Una Sancta*, 'the one holy universal Christian Church, the fellowship of the saints.' "13 The second appears on the last page of his book. Referring to outstanding Christians from the Catholic, the mainline Protestant as well as from the Believers' Churches, he observed: "who of us would wish to deny that this or that member of this group of men was not sent by God to carry out His work of salvation in a time of darkness?! 'Moreover it is required of stewards that they be found trustworthy' (according to the gifts and understanding granted them). Everything that has been considered 'right' and 'perfect' with regard to these questions has, until now, always proven itself to have been only 'relative.' "14 Since Friesen views the factions from the perspective of the *Una Sancta*—that is, from a higher truth—he is forced to the conclusion that human 'truth' is largely factional 'truth' and hence always only relative.

The second of the basic pillars of Friesen's interpretive frame of reference came to him via Jakob Reimer of Felsental. As Friesen put it: "As he turned some important documents over to me with his blessing, he said: 'Write truth, the good and the bad, as the Bible did concerning David!'"15 The choice of models could not have been more appropriate, for as A. T. Olmstead has written about the author of that history:

His complete objectivity is uncanny. David is to be sure, his hero and we realize why he stole the hearts of

all with his winning ways, but he paints David's weaknesses as unsparingly, the banditry of his early life, his repeated lies, his flight to the enemy of his people, his forgetfulness that Michael had saved his life, his intrigue with Bathsheba and its terrible consequences in his family, his degeneration through success and luxury. The other members of the court, even the Zadok who supplanted Abiathar as chief priest, are treated with equal objectivity. Whether Abiathar or not, he is our first great historian.¹⁶

And it became Friesen's concern to write truth—the good and the bad. In pursuit of that goal he was concerned to allow all sides to speak.

Whether Friesen was led to the Alliance movement through his historical studies—which seems eminently possible to me—or whether he arrived at it theologically, it gave him the kind of elevated vantage point above the factional strife which aided his pursuit of truth, a vantage point which every historian must strive to achieve. It also permitted him to recognize that human beings, caught in the vortex of human affairs, rather than being agents acting dispassionately, are more often than not reactors, grasping at partial truths as the consequence of reactions against partial failures. A classic example of this is his evaluation of Anabaptism and Lutheranism:

... Evangelical Pietism in its wholesome essence has, like renewal, a harmonious effect on Mennonitism, just as Mennonitism is the critique and complement of Lutheranism. During the earliest period, both seemed to be mutually exclusive. In reality, together they form a whole when balanced in an apostolic arrangement. And as such a unified balance, and therefore a purified whole, they were to lead the largely deteriorated and impoverished Christianity of the West during the Middle Ages, back to its source. In the meantime, they long regarded it as their duty to condemn one another absolutely. . . .¹⁷

That this was to be the perspective from which Friesen wished to view the history of the origins and development

of the M.B. Church is made apparent in the introduction to the chapter on the establishment of what he calls the "Christian Anabaptist Mennonite Brethren Church in 1860." There he proclaimed: "with God's help, we shall be guided by justice and impartiality according to the law of brotherly and universal love, and that which will truly profit the one universal Church of Christ in all its parts."¹⁸

It is with the above in mind that we must read his interpretation of the emergence of the M.B. Church. His regard for that church, which he had himself joined as a youth, is determined by his belief that evangelical Lutheranism (i.e. Pietism) came together with Anabaptism at its inception. As he states in his section on Wuest:

... Just as we placed Menno Simons' 'Withdrawal from the Catholic Church,' the best of his works, at the beginning of our story of the Mennonites, so we place Wuest's inaugural sermon at the beginning of the section on the M.B. Church. Next to God's Word and His Spirit, Menno and Wuest have actually made the M.B. Church what it is and will be in the Church of Christ. If the joyous doctrine of justification is overly prominent in Wuest's Christian teaching, it counterbalances Menno's very serious, somewhat melancholy theology, which is, however, based on justifying grace, and in their amalgamation, the two streams achieve an apostolic balance. . . .¹⁹

Thus the error of either side, as he remarks a little later on, "is to be corrected, by the Alliance and fellowship movements on a broader scale and the M.B. Church on a smaller scale, each in its own way and sphere of influence."²⁰

In order to demonstrate the truth of the above with regard to the fledgling M.B. Church, Friesen is at pains to establish the fact that the secessionists were intent on going back to Menno, and he establishes this on the basis of a number of citations from the documents of the secessionists. But does he establish in any convincing manner how much the latter really knew about Menno Simons or the early Anabaptists? To what extent were their repeated references to Menno tied to the attempt to establish

themselves as a legitimate "Mennonite" group with access to the established Mennonite privileges? On the other hand, were not the excesses of the young M.B. Church largely the result of Wuest's own one-sided preaching of free grace? ²¹ And if that M.B. Church really did strike the ideal balance between Anabaptism and Evangelical Lutheranism, should these excesses have occurred? Was not the young M.B. Church in fact more influenced by Wuest—in some respects even an aberration of Wuest—than by any profound complement derived from a study of Menno, and did she not arrive at Friesen's "apostolic balance"—if she arrived at it at all—as a result of the initial problems? These questions, it seems to me, are not sufficiently investigated by Friesen. Indeed, some of his own critical remarks about the M.B. Church later in the book would tend to put his broader frame of reference in doubt.

These two aspects—the broad frame of reference and the contradictory specific evidence—become apparent as early as the second paragraph of the section dealing specifically with the M.B. Church. There Friesen observed:

. . . The author wishes at the outset to present his judgment with regard to the origin of the M.B. Church reached on the basis of the material, personal recollections and diligent inquiry from the 'older generation.'

a) The organization of a separate 'M.B. Church,' in the midst of the 'South Russian Mennonite Brotherhood,' based on the Scriptures and the most essential ideas of Menno, given the secularized state of the largest part of the Russian Mennonites and the inability and partial reluctance of the church councils generally to oppose the corruption, was necessary and proved salutary for all of the Russian Mennonites. Generally speaking, however, the founders of the M.B. Church were neither intellectually nor spiritually well enough prepared for the task: several of the co-founders were decidedly incompetent and were exposed by the subsequent events graciously directed by God; many were expelled from the group by the wholesome element; others left of their own accord. . . . ²²

Does this really mesh with Friesen's broad interpretation?

What we have here, it seems to me, is an idealized theology on the one hand, and the reality of the historical events on the other. Nor do the two seem ever quite to come together. To put it another way, the history of the events themselves do not justify the model supposedly drawn from them. Or was it not rather drawn from Friesen's theological perspective?

It is in this second area—the area of the reality of events, especially as they pertain to the origins of the M.B. Church—that Friesen's judgments are, on the whole, unerring. Here it was that he was able to apply Reimer's admonition to "write truth, the good and the bad, as the Bible did concerning David." As Friesen himself repeatedly says, one example shall stand for many: it is his treatment of Johann Classen, obviously one of his Mennonite heroes, and comes in a letter Friesen wrote to Abram Peters on January 11, 1901, which he incorporated in his history. It reads in part as follows:

... I received your letter and have sent it to the brothers Kroeker, the editors of the *Kalender*, with the explanation that I know you as one of our oldest and most revered members, and that I consider your objections with the highest regard. I knew nothing about the article in the *Kalender* before it was published. (Only now have I looked through the article in its entirety.) Kroeker is to be blamed only to the extent of having thrown a shadow upon Claassen without also making reference to positive aspects of the matter. One cannot deny the negative side of Claassen—he did promote emotional fanaticism for a time in a manner I still cannot understand. I have all the hundreds of letters and numerous other articles and I believe I know him even better than you do. You could never rise to more independent criticism of him because you loved him so dearly and love him still. Because you were so deeply impressed by his personality, you could never allow yourself an objective judgment of him. That is the impression I gather from all your interesting and instructive accounts. That Claassen could go along with Kappes against Wuest, is something that can never be forgiven a historical figure like him (God

and the brother can forgive him, but not the historian), just as David's sin and Hezekiah's folly, Luther's flirtation with the princes, Menno's cowardice in the face of the fanatics, the so-called 'harsh Banners,' and the lengthy blindness of the distinguished Wuest concerning the nature of the same Kappes, cannot be forgiven. But as surely as David, Hezekiah, Luther and Menno belong among the greatest of the world's men, so surely Claassen belongs among the greatest men in Russian Mennonite society, and for the Mennonite Brethren Church he is no less a figure than is Zinzendorf for the revived Brethren Church of the Bohemian-Moravians. Claassen is a much greater man than you make him out to be. I say that, convinced that I know him best in all his weaknesses, but also in the totality of his intellectual stature, that is, through the gigantic literary legacy (gigantic for a farmer, even though very intelligent), in the way he borders on the childish and the exalted in a biblical kind of open-heartedness, even when that open-heartedness turns out to his disadvantage (for the status of his person). It is my conviction that the greatest men in our society (if one may speak of greatness in our microscopic Mennonite world) are Johann Cornies, Johann Claassen and Bernhard Harder. Cornies' achievement embraces Mennonite agriculture and education, Harder's achievement the present Mennonite pulpit, and Claassen's achievement—our Brethren Church, which I, despite all the criticism which I have directed at it from time to time (and which I do not retract), consider to be the salvation of Mennonitism in its purely Christian significance and its final purpose.²³

Clearly, though Claassen is one of Friesen's heroes he has no intention of accentuating the positive while deemphasizing the negative. Whereas the Christian must forgive, the historian cannot. He must write the 'good and the bad.' It was because Friesen would allow himself to do nothing less, that he had such a difficult time laying bare the "nakedness of loving [and not-so-loving] old men." And yet it is to be lamented that Friesen did not digest more of his material, give us more of the distilled essence of his thought, and less

of the sometimes tedious material—the rambling discourses, the uninspired reports from the various churches and the meandering recollections of the itinerant ministers.

The above quotation concerning Claassen also clearly reveals Friesen's intention to pass judgment and to instruct in his history. And here he becomes more than a mere historian, for, more often than not, his judgments are combined with spiritual counsel. Two salient reasons appear to account for this. First, Friesen believes it is the historian's obligation to pass judgment. Secondly, his profound love for 'his' Mennonite brotherhood drives him to try to instruct them. Whereas many might have expressed their love by defending and justifying, Friesen recognizes that truth alone can make us free. History can only have relevance if we reconstruct it faithfully and honestly. An idealized history, or a history made 'relevant,' is in the profoundest sense irrelevant. And Friesen expresses his love for the Mennonites quite unabashedly in many parts of his book, but especially in a little pamphlet written in 1914, entitled "Konfession oder Sekte."

... When, in 1912, a short while after I had completed my *History of the Mennonite Brotherhood in Russia* and was once again able to leave my sick-bed, I had the irresistible urge to see, hear and taste my deeply beloved Mennonites in the very flesh, no longer merely on paper. During the extended period of time I had been at work on my history and had lived outside of the Mennonite community, a Mennonite patriotism and an optimism with regard to their future had grown so powerfully within me that I had begun to see things through rose-colored glasses. Especially with regard to the relationship of the Mennonite Church to the M.B. Church. . . .²⁴

This love led him to attempt to teach, to instruct through his history. He shared this desire with the Renaissance Humanists who believed that history was philosophy teaching by example. They too hoped to inspire their readers to better things. In Friesen's case, however, history was not merely to aid in understanding the past, it was to serve as a handmaiden to theology. Thus his criticisms were intended to incite correction. Listen to one of them:

... This artificially pious and reserved attitude was one of the most repulsive aspects of the M.B. Church until recent times . . . (we talk about that which we—as members of the M.B. Church have witnessed with boiling blood and burning brain). This sin of the M.B. Church, too, must be named in a truthful history. We have granted the M.B. Church the great right, in its origination and continuation, of being a Mennonite communion and have established this thoroughly on the basis of the documents. Not only have we presented the great triumphs over its ecclesio-political opponents, but also—and this is even more important—we have incontrovertably documented its triumphs over the ailments of its childhood days. For this reason we have of necessity devoted a vast space to it in our book, and also generously shown our love and appreciation. But we love and appreciate our brethren in the older Mennonite congregations just as much; (especially the determined believers and honest seekers after God) and every injustice which is perpetrated by the 'brethren' against them arouses our indignation as much as that which they experience from the Mennonites. . . .²⁵

Because Friesen loved much, he criticized severely and hoped the criticism would be taken as intended and the guilty parties induced to improve. But he was forced to concede in 1914 that this was not the case. His honesty was seen as bias—and his advice rejected, particularly by many in the Mennonite Church.²⁶ And in the M.B. Church the counsel appears to have been more admired than acted upon, as Machiavelli complained about the use of ancient histories in his own day.

Yet it is in these counsels that Friesen's theological beliefs and his irenic spirit surface again and again. Nor are the two—as we noted already in his description of the confluence of Evangelical Lutheranism and Anabaptism as the recovery of Apostolic Christianity—isolated from one another. His irenic spirit leads him to adopt mediating positions on a number of theological issues, as for example the question of free will and predestination.²⁷ But even where he cannot espouse a mediating position—as in the

case of baptism—he says the following about other Christians: “. . . the author has from his youth to old age traced God’s footprints in the history of His servants and has found no difference in the power of grace between those who were baptized according to our understanding and were strict immersionists or not so strict, and those who were baptized as infants and came to an awareness [of God] through confirmation or otherwise. . . .”²⁸ Hence the counsel that comes to us repeatedly is that we should not think of ourselves in exclusive terms. For, as he continued, “Membership in our churches is after all, not synonymous with membership in ‘God’s Church,’ to which all ‘children of God’ belong.”²⁹

Not only does Friesen hope to instill a more tolerant attitude in his readers—and the sin of the M.B. Church he castigates most severely is precisely its self-righteous intolerance—he wants them to become active reconcilers. He directs this counsel to the true believers in both camps. Speaking of the spiritual life in Gnadenfeld and Rueckenau (the M.B. Church), he said:

. . . That which is alive in Gnadenfeld, and that which is alive in Rueckenau (the center of the M.B. Church) must unite in a spontaneous handshake of brotherly love above the grave of the old quarrels and old resentments. And this shaking of hands must take place between all vital Christians in all Mennonite congregations—and in all Christian confessions—even while faithfully adhering to one’s peculiar insights and duties. I believe that if Lenzmann and Nikolai Schmidt had—unperturbed by Heinrich Franz and Johann Schmidt and similar harsh and one-sided men in the Mennonite Church and ‘Templers’—been able to hold together with a Johann Claassen and Jakob Reimer—as they should have, since all four of them were Christians—held together in spite of and for all that!—the story of our spiritual and intellectual development would have taken a different course.”³⁰

But lest we should assume that Friesen’s irenic spirit submerges his Mennonite-Anabaptist faith, hear this tirade against the innovators:

... Though I am not really an 'old' Mennonite, I have for years been tired, tired, tired of the foreign influences and would like to urge all reformers ('old' Mennonite and Brethren), especially the leaders: Stand still for a moment and ask yourself this question from the perspective of church history: What is Mennonitism? Have we perhaps forgotten to relearn that which was good, as a balance to the endless new, new, new?! Are we not losing a large and essential part of our Mennonite psyche, in the good sense? What does God want of us as a group, a fellowship: that we, while calling ourselves Mennonite, become a conglomerate of Lutheranism, Baptist, and Plymouthism, etc. (we mean in the understanding and manner of expressing our Christianity)? What is the specific direction that God has assigned to us through our original doctrines, history and present situation? Certainly we should now more seriously begin to study our own background, examine the newly acquired for its values, throw away the ballast and deliberately, discreetly, bring the good old and the good new—for 'every scribe fit for the kingdom' brings forth old and new from his treasures—into a proper relationship.³¹

This admonition, as pertinent today as it was in Friesen's, should probably have constituted the conclusion to this essay. But there is one more aspect to Friesen's history—aside from his very dated discussion of the origins of Anabaptism—which calls for our attention. Like most theological church historians, Friesen believes he can trace the hand of God in the history of the M.B. Church. Hence such phrases as : "it pleased God"; "God had chosen"; "God sent"; "a remarkable guidance of God"; and "God did not wish," etc. Being a historian of the Reformation, such phrases have always left me with an uneasy feeling. For precisely those aspects of Lutheran church history which the Lutherans deemed providential, the Catholics have seen as demonic. The same is true of much of the rest of the confessional and polemical writing of the period. Furthermore, God seems to lead only when things turn out well for our side; if they do not, apparently the forces of evil are at work. Would it not be much wiser simply to explain

these events as best we can and leave the rest to God? And is not assigning the responsibility to God a way to avoid doing the historian's hard work? Indeed, could not the hand of God—if it is at work—be seen more clearly were the historian to explain as fully as possible, rather than piously assign the responsibility to God? For, after all, who of us is capable of saying that God was at work here, but not there?

There is no doubt that Friesen was a great man. His theological and historical vision transcended the petty denominational boundaries, and yet he had an unerring sense for the importance of the recovery of the "Anabaptist Vision" for the spiritual life of his Mennonite brotherhood. He had a profound love for the M.B. and wider Mennonite fellowship, and yet he chastised them for their many failings with stinging words of rebuke. Whereas he may have held an idealized view of M.B. theology, he seldom allowed this to affect his interpretation of the events themselves. He took very seriously his responsibility to write truth, the good and the bad, because he recognized there was no point in embellishing the story. After all, like the Old Testament historian of David, he was aware that the God he served was the embodiment of justice, and that He required the same kind of impartial justice on the part of his scholarly servant. Embellishing or idealizing our history can only serve to reinforce our misconceptions of ourselves.

All of this is not to say that Friesen's work has no failings. It has many; and we have pointed to some of them. Much of his work is dated—particularly his interpretation of Anabaptism which he derived from Ludwig Keller³² and the *Martyrs Mirror*. In other parts he neglects to take into account many factors—such as economic, social, etc.—which historians today would consider as a matter of routine. In that regard, the approach to his history is also dated. But that is merely to say that he, like us, was a human being with partial vision.

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FOOTNOTES

- 1 P.M. Friesen, *The Mennonite Brotherhood in Russia (1789-1910)*, J.B. Toews, Abraham Friesen, Peter J. Klassen and Harry Loewen, Translation & Editorial Committee (Winnipeg, 1978), pp. xxviii-xxix.
- 2 *Ibid.*, p. 201.
- 3 *Ibid.*, pp. 19-28.
- 4 *Ibid.*, pp. 928-929.
- 5 *Ibid.*, pp. 659-843.
- 6 *Ibid.*, p. 280.
- 7 *Ibid.*, pp. 201-202.
- 8 Irwin Panofsky, "Artist, Scientist, Genius: Notes on the 'Renaissance-Daemmerung'," in *The Renaissance: Six Essays* (New York, 1962), p. 147.
- 9 Friesen, *Mennonite Brotherhood*, p. 311.
- 10 *Ibid.*, p. 305.
- 11 *Ibid.*, p. 978.
- 12 Quoted in Abraham Friesen, "The Impulse Toward Restitutionist Thought in Christian Humanism," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* (March, 1976), 39.
- 13 Friesen, *Mennonite Brotherhood*, p. 101.
- 14 *Ibid.*, p. 980.
- 15 *Ibid.*, p. 2.
- 16 Quoted in Abraham Friesen, "Interpreting Anabaptism," *Direction*, IV (October, 1975), 376.
- 17 Friesen, *Mennonite Brotherhood*, p. 212.
- 18 *Ibid.*, p. 202.
- 19 *Ibid.*, p. 212.
- 20 *Ibid.*, p. 212.
- 21 *Ibid.*, p. 211.
- 22 *Ibid.*, p. 213.
- 23 *Ibid.*, pp. 501-502.
- 24 P.M. Friesen, *Konfession oder Sekte* (Halbstadt, 1914), p. 3.

- 25 Friesen, *Mennonite Brotherhood*, pp. 645-649.
- 26 Friesen, *Konfession oder Sekte*, p. 3.
- 27 Friesen, *Mennonite Brotherhood*, p. 100.
- 28 *Ibid.*, p. 302.
- 29 *Ibid.*
- 30 *Ibid.*, p. 261.
- 31 *Ibid.*, p. 310.
- 32 See especially Ludwig Keller, *Die Reformation und die älteren Reformparteien* (Leipzig, 1885).

VOICES FROM OUR PAST: THE POLYPHONIC HISTORY OF P.M. FRIESEN

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In proposing to say something about the style and form of an historical work such as that before us, it seems to me advisable to be clear at the outset about how such terms are to be used. Far from thinking of them as peripheral, it is my contention that they may be of critical importance in assessing the meaning and value of Friesen's history. Professional historians will, I think, agree with Friesen that the printed original (and its translation as well) does not constitute a finished historical analysis and consequently that, as a history, it is *formally* problematic. At the same time there can be little doubt of the singular importance of this work in its particular vantage point in Mennonite history and historiography, despite the attendant problems. It follows that a serious approach to understanding and interpreting the work will have to address itself to some formal questions in order to gain an adequate perception of its meaning.

I propose to use the terms form and style very simply: style describes the HOW as against the WHAT of a statement; it is the way something is said, the voice of the speaker. However, we have, as we all know, many voices in this book—a veritable host of witnesses—most of which have been preserved in their original flavor by the author in addition to—and often distinctly different from—his own voice. The work as a whole is a complex structure in which these voices are assembled somewhat like a chorus at rehearsal—harmonious passages frequently offset by stray notes and at times by strident cacophanes. For these larger structures I will use the term: form. Thus we may refer to the whole as an amalgum of individual voices combined in what may fairly be called a polyphonic structure, of which the conductor is P.M. Friesen himself.

In his foreword, entitled "Geschichte einer Geschichte" (the story of a history), Friesen points out the passages in

his book which are most distinctly his own personal voice, recording his position on questions like the M.B. Church founding (165), baptism (256), the *Allianz* (447), religious freedom and propaganda (528), education (600) and the like.¹ These passages, scattered throughout the book, are framed by the Preface itself and the Conclusion. In some ways they are the core of the book, coming as close to the historian's own judgement as one is likely to, so much so, that one might even be tempted to excerpt these passages and construct from them an approximation of the finished analysis Friesen might have written. Indeed, we find here his interpretation of what he considered key events and questions in Russian Mennonite history. However enticing this notion might be, that would be in effect to deny his part in the rest of the volume, and while this may indeed be more difficult to assess, we must not lose sight of the fact that the bulky remainder—his selection from statistics, institutional accounts, pamphlets, letters, diaries or whatever—constitutes, however indirectly and perhaps however unsuccessfully, *his* account, *his* interpretation as well. At this point a formidable formal problem arises, since we are often not in a position to judge just what Friesen actually did with the source materials before him, despite his obviously sincere statement: "I have been at pains conscientiously to cite all the sources" (vi). His massive torso includes obvious quotations of complete documents, like Wuest's *Antrittspredigt*, but also many partial quotations and varying degrees of strict and free paraphrase. Since in many cases the documents are no longer extant it is impossible to assess how close our text is to the original—and of course, the basis of his selection from all those available to him. This is not to fault Friesen, who was only following accepted 19th century practise, especially with regard to critical apparatus, but the fact of the matter appears to be that in many parts of the text the reader is presented with material that is, strictly speaking, neither the original document nor a finished analysis, a fact that puts the text under a kind of proto-interpretation, since we are obviously guided by Friesen's choice in the materials he presents. Since these are often most concrete (that is, subjective, personal accounts of real or perceived human

situations), the reader is inclined to suspend his disbelief and to empathize with the 'story'—almost more the response to a novel than to historical record. Because of this, and because of Friesen's obvious attempts to overcome his own subjectivity and to 'be fair', the reader is disarmed and unlikely to read critically.

Indeed, the book Friesen has written in some ways reminds one of the typical 19th century biography—packed with details and drawing upon many sources like letters, memoirs and the like—more than history. Perhaps this is what P.M. Friesen meant by "innere Geschichte", in his prologue to Chapter D, where he writes:

Since the dear brethren in America have had the courage to publish the documentary history of the "external" events surrounding the establishment of the M.B. Church, and since the author was commissioned to write the "inner" history of the M.B. Church

The mass of material available for an "inner" history, both with regard to its light and dark aspects, is so surprisingly large

A great number of letters, documents, diaries, reports," "memoirs," etc. are available These letters — as accurate as photographs — of persons who, differing in their persuasions, were involved in the brethren movement, characterize that movement [the "inner history"] much better than even the official documents. (201/2)

In any case, the sources quoted are not what we would consider the 'usual' ones for an institutional history. For although Friesen does use official minutes recording institutional decisions and that kind of documentation, what stand out in the mind are not so much these evidences, as those others that are about and by people. Friesen allows his many witnesses to address the reader—often directly—and this in the form of personal reminiscences, letters and other 'personal' documents. And so, although a chronicle is told, this is literally done by means of many voices—a phenomenon most interesting from the vantage point of style (and most problematic for a

translation!) and one that raises the question: What *are* the voices of our past? Or, to paraphrase Rudy Wiebe: Where are the voices coming from?

In deciding to place *people* into the centre of his book rather than events primarily (or institutions) Friesen took great difficulties upon himself. He was aware of this, especially in view of the fact that he was writing *Zeitgeschichte* ("To write contemporary history is a difficult task for one's psyche!") and that many of the protagonists would be alive—and of course he himself was both protagonist and author! Still, Friesen was in good company in making this decision, for Gottfried Arnold had made the same choice. In the Foreword to his monumental *Kirchen- und Ketzer Historie* Arnold says:

As regards method . . . I have considered that one most useful according to which in each age first of all those authors, teachers and persons are presented by whom history was made and by whom the consequent comedies or tragedies were enacted, as it were, so that knowledge of the same might cast light on the ensuing body of material. (Foreword)²

Friesen does not face his task with the equanimity of distance and obviously cannot contemplate the story of his brothers quite as a divine comedy, but he does place the chief characters—those about whose experiences and convictions the events took shape—before us in a very concrete way. It is through understanding them that we will understand the events. Since these events are our history, it is through understanding them (the characters) that we will come nearer to understanding ourselves.

In the following I would like to discuss several instances which may be considered examples of the way in which this history is shaped. First I will say something about Friesen's own style, his voice, that is, and how it comes through in translation. Then I will take the case of 'Pfarrer' Wuest and try to show how Friesen conveys influential voices of the past through him. Finally I would like to advance some comments on the use of this kind of history in the light of its style and form.

In his tract, "Konfession oder Sekte" of 1914, P.M. Friesen refers to his natural disposition as "meine grosse

Lebensplage" (the bane of my life) (p. 4). There is no doubt that Friesen was a man of spirit, as well as a spiritual man, and that it was in his nature to become involved in the questions of the day to the point of controversy—hardly the detachment one might ordinarily presuppose in a disciplined historian. (Of course anyone who knows historians doubts there is such a thing as a dispassionate historian!) Friesen's temperament shows itself everywhere, from the battles and skirmishes he was involved in right down to the exclamation and question marks, often together, which crowd his manuscript pages. His parentheses are often neither more or less than outbursts of indignation or shouts of joy, as are many footnotes. (All the more shame that these notes have been relegated to the end of the translated book!). While P.M. Friesen may not be considered a German stylist of note, there is a certain force in his language and the reader will encounter moments of eloquence. I think that some of these have been captured in translation as well. By and large, he is somewhat inclined to become bogged down in the potential obscurity of German syntax, and although this too is understandable in terms of his efforts to pit divergent viewpoints against one another in the interests of fairness—thus the many adversative clauses—the result is too often a loss of focus and ultimately of meaning. The translation has had to wrestle with this phenomenon, and I would venture to suggest that an uninitiated reader will find much of the English text difficult, while someone who knows the original will welcome the relative clarity of the translation. Still, when all is said and done, the voice of P.M. Friesen projects conscience and conviction in ringing tones, and although he is actually wrong in assuming responsibility for all of the points of view (*Anschaungen*, VIII) in his book, certainly for those quoted directly and at length, there can be no doubt about the grave sense of responsibility which characterizes his approach to his task as a historian, and consequently his style.

In addition to the argument which he makes throughout his book and the large blocks of primary or nearly primary material which he presents, P.M. Friesen has himself given many short sketches, which have a kind of life of their own within the larger form, both of individuals and of situations, some of which are unforgettable. Readers will

recall a delightful passage, strongly reminiscent of Arnold Dyck, which tells of how life on the land had once been. "Jetzt und Einst", based on Kroekers *Familienkalender* and on the author's own memories (#65), tells of how the children of a previous generation worked in the fields and grew up to become the "Ehrsame Ohm Heinrich Janzen" and "Mumke Niefeldsche"—an idyllic tale told with much nostalgia, but also with didactic irony and the good humor of love and acceptance. I have not established the degree to which this is excerpted from the *Kalender*, but it appears to be largely Friesen's own creation. Unfortunately, there are few passages which capture the flavor of the earlier Russian period as graphically.

My own favorite among the many portraits—this one a miniature—is the description of the teacher A.A. Neufeld, about whom the author says:

... we have never been able to think of him in any other way but to be reminded of the Savior's words: "Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness . . ." and of the expression of a great Christian: "Blessed are those who are homesick, for they shall arrive at home." (760)

Neufeld, a friend of Friesen's who had died at the age of 47 in 1909, is portrayed as a figure with the kind of potential which was to show itself in that last pre-revolutionary generation and which was so promising a sign to the author. A contemporary reader will likely be jarred by the juxtaposition, in the description, of Jesus and Jung-Stilling, a popular religious author of the later 18th century. In both these examples, however, Friesen has named important sources for the kind of life that characterized the Russian Mennonite of the 19th century. In the first, idyllic passage, the books are named which are found in even the humblest home and which provide the spiritual sustenance which turns a prankish lad into a church elder: Menno's *Fundamentbuch*, *Die Wandelnde Seele*, *Hofackers Sermons* and the *Gesangbuch*. In the second example the two *Seligpreisungen* are more than curious. The first, not the most popular, though perhaps most needful from the

Sermon on the Mount—indicating idealism and perhaps even a sense of social justice (?); the second, taken from the influential novel *Heimweh oder der Schluessel zu demselben*—the nature of whose influence I will comment upon later.

At this point it may suffice to say that it lies in the nature of Friesen's style—moving at times very intuitively I feel—to name names and sources without including them specifically in his argument, so that they become a part of the many concrete images and distinct voices that we see and hear. Much of the value of his incomplete incorporation of facts and influences is in the result that the reader is left to sort these things out for himself, which can be a very beneficial process.

Of all the major and minor figures in the book I have chosen one related to my own area of particular interest, and although he is not even a Mennonite (here P.M. Friesen would insert both an exclamation point and a question mark) there is no doubt that the author considered Eduard Wuest to be of very great significance for Mennonite history. P.M. Friesen does incorporate the figure of Wuest in an argument about the state of the Mennonite church and its need for revitalisation. (This too is done very concretely, using the imagery of the "impoverished" house of Menno, to which Wuest brought "vital air, warmth, food and drink" (p. 212). Friesen also talks about the teachings of Wuest, but he does not describe the variety and mix of influences that came to the Russian colonies through Wuest, Jung-Stilling and others and which, as Friesen himself documents, left their mark on the whole brotherhood and especially on the M.B. Church. By the manner of his depiction, that is by putting Wuest before us in a very concrete fashion, Friesen does, however, give us many indications about these influences, and I would like to suggest some that would reward further study.

By his message and his manner (Friesen emphasizes *both*) this pietist Lutheran from Wuerttemberg focussed the spiritual malaise of the Mennonite communities and preached the radical cure of spiritual separation. At sundry times prior to Wuest's coming the influence of 'classical' Pietism had been transmitted to the Russian colonies by German and German-trained clergy and teachers, but the

voices that spoke through Wuest were, to a considerable extent, a more recent phenomenon, combining the already more idiosyncratic south German pietism of Bengel with impulses from Jacob Boehme, Swedenborg (via Oettinger) and the emphasis on dynamic preaching of the *Erweckungsbewegung*, Hofacker, Gustav Werner and the Methodists.³ These influences affect both theology and the religious life and practice. For the first, one may refer to the concentration on *Heilsgewissheit*,⁴ even more than *Wiedergeburt*, and an eschatological preoccupation.⁵ For the second, the formation of separated congregations (classical Pietism provided for *Stunden* within the orthodox framework), a new popular emphasis on church music and devotional literature may be mentioned. It is not beside the point to mention in this connection that the separatist movement in Wuerttemberg pietism was greatly fuelled by the introduction in the 1790's of a new hymnal which contained new *Aufklaerungslieder* and removed some others which were considered out of date.⁶ These separatist congregations were those most prone to leave Wuerttemberg in an eastward direction, especially in the famine years of 1817 and after. Although he doesn't discuss the question *per se*, Friesen shows us Wuest's attachment to singing and to Hillers, *Schaetzkaestlein*, for example, and the role it played in his ministry.⁷ In any case, to refer to Wuest simply in terms of Pietism as Adrian does,⁸ for example, is an oversimplification, and will not help us to understand the nature of the forces at work prior to the founding of the M.B. Church. In particular, Adrian's suggestion that Wuest's Pietism "reflects the spirit of Anabaptism" should be challenged on historical as well as theological grounds.

From what I have been able to ascertain about Wuest's preparation for his impressive ministry in the German and Mennonite colonies, it appears fair to conclude that, despite his theological training in Tuebingen, Wuest cannot be considered a theologian in the sense of having worked out a systematic and consistent theological program of his own. Rather, he was primarily—as even his enemies in Wuerttemberg described him—*ein geborener Volksredner*,⁹ who, because of the impact of his preaching, transmitted the various influences of his own background

and experience unwittingly¹⁰ and unintentionally, and some of the great unhappiness of his later life was in the realization that through his work things had been set in motion which he had not foreseen and of which he could not approve.

I would like to add a few words about Jung-Stilling, whose name, according to the index, is not explicitly mentioned in the book and whose influence is tangible nevertheless. Look up Jung-Stilling in the *Mennonite Encyclopedia* and he appears to be a popular, influential Pietist writer in whom Mennonite readers would be naturally interested. In the introduction to the novel *Heimweh*, there is material which would support such a notion: The Pfarrer, who reminds one of Wuest, has dared to bury a Mennonite woman in the churchyard and consequently suffers persecution from the Consistory. But when one reads further the fiction reveals itself as a typical 18th century *Geister- und Spukgeschichte* in the sentimental tradition. It is the story of a spiritual journey, but the similarity is more to the *Magic Flute* than *Pilgrims Progress*. The preoccupation with secret orders and mysterious goings-on is based on the teachings of Freemasonry¹¹ rather than Christ and the progress of the pilgrim Eugenius is in terms of a kind of wisdom characteristic of the 18th century enlightenment (a chief character is called 'Forscher') and the fascination with the East as the place of refuge (*Bergungsort*) takes up and popularizes vague theological notions about the end times and the rule of the Antichrist in Western Europe (France/Napoleon). Belk has expanded on this theme and its application in Mennonite history in his book, *The Great Trek*. The influence of Jung-Stilling's novel on a new, broader reading public has been documented in the physical relocation of whole communities to Palastine and southern Russia, and it is in the context of movements such as these, largely from Wuerttemberg, that we must see the influences that came upon the Mennonites from their German neighbor colonists. It would be worthwhile, I think, to explore how this kind of 'devotional' material influenced the literary tastes of our people, which appear to have kept to similar melodramatic themes.¹² All of this, too, belongs to the context of the appearance on the scene of 'Pastor' Wuest.

I think that it is the task of historians—religious, social and literary as well as ordinary garden variety historians—to inquire into the context and background of these elements that we have long taken for granted. There is a common misconception (one in which I have participated) that the modern evangelical message, or the Pietist message or, for that matter, the Anabaptist message, somehow come directly from the source, rather than through the mediation of human history. Much has been done to reconstruct the elements of Anabaptism in order to understand it. Much remains to be done to understand the circumstances in which the most diverse influences were absorbed by and left their mark upon our forefathers in Russia. P.M. Friesen himself shows awareness of these factors when, for example, in connection with the teacher Heinrich Heese I, he speaks of the new Pietism:

After all, Heese's kind of faith was also rooted in the warm-hearted, methodologically strongly emotional (in its extreme form, too sentimental) orthodoxy of that time [around 1840] which had begun, even then, to displace the cool, intellectual Protestant rationalism. The former is called the "new Pietism." (699)

And in tracing the influence of Wuest in figures like Bernhard Harder, who consciously emulated him, he speaks of "Wuest's faith in Christ and his style of preaching" (946) and on the later quotes witnesses who said: "That is exactly the way the mad Wuest does it" (948) or "He has said the truth, but why exaggerate so. . ." (948). In order to illustrate the power of Harder's preaching, Friesen quotes his long poems, (which unfortunately don't have this effect in translation—I will not judge the original) rather than other texts and thereby again emphasizes the stylistic nature of Harder's importance: To quote Friesen:

. . . as a figure of major importance, we would place him immediately behind our most important intellectual giant, Johann Cornies. His importance for the spiritual elevation of our fellowship, most immediately through his personal power as the creator of a new method of preaching, is extended into the entire "Brotherhood Movement." (945)

These varied references have been collected to illustrate Friesen's awareness of the importance of style and form in the impact of the Wuestian revitalization of the church. As I indicated earlier, this is not done by virtue of conscious analysis so much as simply by presentation of the figures themselves, Wuest, Harder, etc. in a very concrete way. An abstract analysis along traditional theological lines could I think miss a very crucial part of the historical phenomenon. As we know, traditional Pietism does not really constitute a new or different theology, but it is in the form, the practice, and in the emphases and preoccupations that the particular spirit reveals itself. And it is my point that Friesen's book, while not identifying and analysing all these elements, through *its* concrete form enables us to sense the influences and indeed, with some help, to "prove the spirits" as we attempt to come to terms with our spiritual heritage.

I grew up in the North End M.B. Church in Winnipeg, where I heard names like Spurgeon, Campbell Morgan, Jakob Kroeker, E. Sauer, names that indicate a recognizable, if not particularly Mennonite, religious tradition. My earlier glimpses of the 'Anabaptist Vision' introduced me to names like Grebel, Manz and Menno. There was always something splendid and faraway in those incredible characters and tales of heroism and martyrdom. Reading P.M. Friesen has been for me a very different kind of experience, for here I feel, like Friesen himself, that we are dealing, while not with *Zeitgeschichte*, very clearly with ourselves.

Friesen's history records the voices of our own past. I have concentrated on one group of elements that inform the voice of Wuest. It is a powerful voice, especially from the viewpoint of the M.B. Church. There are of course other voices. The imposing figures of Cornies and of August Lenzmann, the pioneering teachers Voth and Heese, the protagonists in the drama of the M.B. separation, the enterprising Johann Claassen, the retiring Heinrich Huebert, these and many others come to mind. There are the conservatives and the radicals, the 'joyous' and the legalistic—all of these amalgamated and presented by P.M. Friesen, himself a passionate partisan for the open brotherhood.

What is the use of such a history? Will the immense

trouble of translating this amorphous chronicle have been worth it? Let me give two answers:

1. Researchers, beyond those who have had access to the original, will be able to consult the interpretive collection of sources and to pursue further the many questions which it stimulates. For us to arrive at a useful account of how we became what we are, it will be necessary for questions about the social, political and cultural aspects of our people to be answered, as well as questions of historical theology.

2. The second point is the one that I think follows more particularly from my own line of questioning. I believe that P.M. Friesen's book is a source for the Mennonite of today, that is, the average Mennonite educated enough to experience an identity crisis. Of these there are many. Not that I expect the book to be a best seller or indeed, that anyone would read it through from beginning to end (as some of us have done several times in the past year or two). Rather, I consider it an anthology in which the reader will find, no doubt by chance, unforgettable and compelling passages—most obviously in the short biographies, but also in the extensive letters and memoirs and even in sermons and other forbidding documents. He will find this fascinating because he will recognize himself in much of it. The patterns of thought and patterns of faith in which he has his being are prefigured there, or are shown in their formation. And many of the problems of those days, he will find, are still ours today—like the institutional separation within the Mennonite brotherhood. P.M. Friesen, who does not have all the answers, comments on these questions with passionate and tolerant wisdom.

In several places Friesen calls for a fuller biographical treatment of the characters whose voices he wished to preserve. He recognized, I think, the value of the kind of concrete record which enables a reader to empathize with, to become involved with his past. And I think that is the kind of history which P.M. Friesen wrote.

FOOTNOTES

- 1 *The Mennonite Brotherhood in Russia* (1789-1910) Winnipeg, 1978. (Page references are to the German original throughout).
- 2 Cited from the edition of 1700 (Frankfurt/Main: Fritsch).
- 3 For detailed descriptions of Wuerttemberg developments see H. Hermelink, *Geschichte der evangelischen Kirche in in Wuerttemberg* (Stuttgart, 1949) and H. Lehmann, *Pietismus und weltliche Ordnung in Wuerttemberg vom 17. bis zum 20. Jahrhundert*. (Stuttgart, 1969). Cf. also J. Urry, *The Closed and the Open* (unpublished diss. Oxford, 1975), who distinguishes between the 'old' and the 'new' pietism (p. 561f.) and claims that emigrations to the east were of 'old' pietists unhappy with the 'new'.
- 4 The best example may be that of Wuest himself, for whom the key experience appears to have taken place a year after the successful launching of his evangelical ministry.
- 5 Wuerttemberg's strong interest in the end times, deriving from the influential Bengel, predates the Darbyist movement, which only reached Germany in the 1850's. 1836 was the date named by Bengel for the second coming, as a result of which the houses in the pietist community Kornthal were lightly constructed—an early example of built-in obsolescence. The houses still stand, however.
- 6 See Hermelink, p. 287f.
- 7 While still in Wuerttemberg, Wuest had been attacked because of his popular use of religious songs, particularly among school children.
- 8 In "Born of Anabaptism and Pietism", p. 5.
- 9 See *Wuest Akte*, Landeskirchliches Archiv Stuttgart, Bestand A 27, Bd. 3632, 30/Item 3. I would like to thank Herr Ott of the Archiv and Dr. Horst Quiring for their kind assistance in locating this previously unknown source.
- 10 Urry comes to the same conclusion: "Wuest spent the

last years of his life struggling to contain the forces he had unwittingly released." (p. 581).

- 11 G. Stecher, in *Jung-Stilling als Schriftsteller* (Palaestra CXX, Berlin, 1913) claims that Jung-Stilling was himself a freemason, although this information was not included in his autobiographical writings. In a chapter entitled "Stilling als Freimaurer" he cites a letter of Stilings with the observation: "ich war gewöhnlicher Freimaurer." (p. 133).
- 12 The large question concerning the kind of language introduced to our people through these influences can only be hinted at here. The language of Pietism is a very different language from that used by Menno. It has much more in common with the *Empfindsamkeit* of the 18th century, to which it is related, both historically and in kind. Both deal with individual human experience in affective terms; the religious idiom, whether in sermons, songs or 'devotional' literature, is characterized by two features in particular: the inner life and this in terms of experience and feeling. Although the forms were brought to culmination in the songs of Zinzendorf, the pietist idiom has become codified to the point of having become a new orthodoxy, if not a Procrustean bed, for evangelical Christianity. In order to understand what happened to the Mennonite and especially the M.B. brotherhood, it would be well to pay close attention to the development of these linguistic forms, which, after all, bespeak the forms and patterns of religious experience.

THE HISTORIOGRAPHY OF THE BIRTH OF THE MENNONITE BRETHREN CHURCH:

AN INTRODUCTION

Peter J. Klassen

Like most movements of reform and dissent, the Mennonite Brethren Church was born amid controversy and tension. Repudiating and denouncing the existing Mennonite leadership, the initiators of the new movement consciously and deliberately chose a position which emphasized new dimensions and new goals, and which thereby castigated existing power structures and value systems. Lines of division were quickly drawn, and a new entity appeared in the Mennonite setting. The justification for the formation of the new movement, and the validity of the charges hurled against traditional patterns, however, became at once issues of intense debate and difference. Questions of causation carried with the implicit authentication or condemnation of the founding of the new church, and so the interpretation of the events of 1860 became, on the one hand, an attempted self-affirmation; on the other, often an effort to demonstrate the erroneous assumptions and unwarranted action. Thus, from its birth, the new church was saddled with a historiography charged with emotionalism and often created by vested interest groups.

The earliest interpretations of the events of 1860 came from the participants themselves, whether protagonist, antagonist, or impartial mediator. Predictably, those who took the lead in forming the new church emphatically asserted that their action had been motivated by the noblest spiritual ideal—the creation of a church where the claims of Christ were taken seriously and where the beliefs and practices of the early Anabaptists were faithfully held and observed. Their opponents asserted rather that the causes were to be found in spiritual pride and disappointed personal desires.

Over the years, accounts written by the Mennonite Brethren have tended to follow the broad outlines of the founding fathers. Spiritual decadence on the one hand, and a sincere desire to build a fellowship faithful to the teachings of Christ on the other, were seen as the basic causal factors. In his *Origin of the Mennonite Brethren Church*,¹ Jacob Bekker, one of the founders, depicted the new movement as necessitated by the "decadent condition" of the "apostate church,"² and, as one of the eighteen men who signed the document of secession on January 6, 1860, he regarded the founding of the new church as the result of fervent prayer,³ and a bold venture of faith.⁴ Scant reference was made to any causative factors other than spiritual, although he felt that earlier disputes had fostered a spirit of animosity.

No single study, of course, has been even remotely as influential in shaping our understanding of the events of 1860 as has P.M. Friesen's celebrated history. His interpretation has largely been accepted as normative, not only by the Mennonite Brethren themselves, but by many others as well. In Friesen's analysis of the causes leading to the rupture of 1860, religious factors are clearly predominant, indeed, virtually exclusively so. In the numerous sources he has quoted, such as reports of various Mennonite Brethren founders, e.g., Jakob Reimer and Heinrich Huebert,⁵ as well as the analyses by leaders who never joined the movement, such as Elder Johann Harder,⁶ Friesen has chosen to highlight the spiritual dimensions of the crisis. The birth of the Mennonite Brethren Church is portrayed as the result of the interaction of a desire for spiritual renewal and recovery on the one hand, and a harsh, repressive, authoritarian resistance on the other. Social, cultural, economic, and political factors, though examined in other contexts, are not seen as significant dimensions in the events of 1860. It should be noted that Friesen himself was aware that he had not fully integrated historical event and contextual setting when, in his lengthy introduction, he admitted that pressures of time and health had prevented creation of a work characterized by unity and interpretive coherence.

In his narrative, Friesen has presented the broad outlines which formed the basis of most future Mennonite

Brethren historiography: the attempts to bring a spiritual awakening in the earlier part of the nineteenth century, the numerous external factors which stimulated calls for spiritual renewal, the revivalistic ministry of Pastor Wuest, the Bible studies and missions festivals, the reading of pietistic books and periodicals, the formation of small groups of devout advocates of reform, the insistence of having communion only with serious believers, then the expulsion from the Gnadenfeld congregation, and the subsequent formation of the Mennonite Brethren Church. Most later Mennonite Brethren histories have rehearsed these familiar themes.

Typical approaches are to be found in the brief surveys written by Peter Regier (*Kurzgefasste Geschichte der Mennoniten-Bruedergemeinde*)⁷ and J.F. Harms (*Die Geschichte der Mennoniten Brueder-Gemeinde*).⁸ The roots of the new movement are seen as being grounded in the desire for spiritual renewal; non-religious factors are not discussed. The later account by J.H. Lohrenz (*The Mennonite Brethren Church*),⁹ presents similar analyses, while the much longer and more interpretive account by A.H. Unruh (*Die Geschichte der Mennoniten-Bruedergemeinde*)¹⁰ also stresses the quest for spiritual vitality, but examines virtually no causative factors other than religious. It should be noted, however, that Unruh is not content with an unquestioning, uncritical acceptance of traditional hagiography, and insists that the founders of the new church were unfair and unbalanced in their denunciation of the old church.¹¹

The recent work of John A. Toews (*A History of the Mennonite Brethren Church*),¹² draws attention to various renewal movements within the larger Mennonite community of Russia, and he too pays tribute to the positive efforts of numerous leaders who later declined to become a part of the new movement. As far as causative factors are concerned, however, only spiritual issues are emphasized; socio-economic issues are specifically rejected as being insignificant.¹³ Like Unruh, Toews concludes that the founders were far too sweeping and severe in their denunciation of the leaders of the old church.¹⁴ Like Friesen and Unruh, however, he leaves unanswered the request implicit in Elder Johann Harder's poignant letter to

Heinrich Huebert in which the Ohrloff elder agrees that the church desperately needs renewal and that he hopes united efforts will bring that revitalization.¹⁵ Indeed, one of the perplexing questions about the rupture in 1860 is the apparent unwillingness of the Mennonite Brethren leaders to work with and within the Ohrloff congregation.

Numerous short treatments of the rise of the Mennonite Brethren Church have similarly portrayed the 1860 division as the result of a quest for spiritual vitality, often expressed in Anabaptist and Pietist patterns. Among the several historical sketches which illustrate that approach are the writings of Frank C. Peters¹⁶ and Victor Adrian,¹⁷ as well as a number of short overviews which have appeared occasionally in denominational literature. Several studies by other than Mennonite Brethren writers have not deviated substantially from these basic outlines. Thus, John Horsch, in his *Mennonites in Europe*,¹⁸ after examining the familiar themes of Wuest's ministry and the impact of Bible studies, concluded that a major factor leading to the founding of the new church was the old church's leadership's "failing in regard to enforcement of discipline,"¹⁹ while C.H. Wedel, in his *Abriss der Geschichte der Mennoniten*, stressed the negative effect of the harsh authoritarianism of the church elders.²⁰ Similarly, Carl H.A. van der Smitten, in his *Kurzgefasste Geschichte und Glaubenslehre der Altevangelischen Taufgesinnten oder Mennoniten*,²¹ commended the brethren for their desire to have only serious believers in the church; he did not, however, pass judgment on the necessity or validity of the actual methods used in forming a new church.

Not all interpreters of the events of 1860, however, have seen them as only religiously conditioned. Attempts have been made to examine the interaction of various social, economic and religious factors. One of the most widely-read books on Mennonite history has long been C. Henry Smith's *History of the Mennonites*,²² subsequently revised and enlarged by Cornelius Krahn.²³ This volume emphasizes the impact of external influences, especially that of the Pietists and Baptists, but then focuses on the economic tensions and social alienation as significant causative forces. The bitter struggle between the landowners and the large landless body of tenant farmers and laborers is seen as

especially crucial, so that the rise of the Mennonite Brethren is interpreted in large measure as a protest movement of the dispossessed.²⁴ A similar emphasis is developed by Cornelius Krahn when he writes that the Mennonite Brethren movement "found its adherents chiefly in the lower strata of society."²⁵ It should be noted that others, such as Alexander Klaus, in his *Unsere Kolonien*,²⁶ Adolf Ehrt, in his *Das Mennonitentum in Russland von seiner Einwanderung bis zur Gegenwart*,²⁷ Franz Isaak, in his *Die Molotschnaer Mennoniten*,²⁸ and E.K. Francis, in his "The Mennonite Commonwealth in Russia, 1789-1914: A Sociological interpretation,"²⁹ regarded economic tensions as important factors in the birth of the new movement.

Assumptions of this sort have been challenged by John A. Toews in his recent *History of the Mennonite Brethren Church*. He has demonstrated, rather conclusively, I think, that many of the early Mennonite Brethren leaders were prosperous business men, well-situated farmers, and teachers.³⁰ There can be no doubt that many of the founders of the new movement were economically well-to-do; some of their subsequent actions would have been impossible if that were not the case. When Toews goes on to state, however, that "the Mennonite Brethren did not chiefly belong to the landless group,"³¹ he is confusing the composition of the new movement with its reason for being, and he differentiates too sharply between the Mennonite Brethren and other Mennonites. Available evidence indicates clearly that a considerable majority of Mennonites in Russia in the early 1860s belonged to the landless class. Franz Isaak, in his *Molotschnaer Mennoniten*, asserts that fully two-thirds of the Mennonites in that settlement belonged to the landless majority.³² In Chortitza the two groups were about evenly divided.³³ It would therefore be strange indeed if the renewal movement appealed mainly to the landowners. What seems more likely is that the rise of the new movement followed the classical pattern of dissident movements as portrayed in Crane Brinton's *Anatomy of Revolution*. Thus, the impetus and early direction of the upheaval came from business and intellectual leaders, but as the movement grew, it attracted those who saw in it the prospect of desired reform, whether they were of the landed or landless elements.

It must also be noted that the early Mennonite Brethren leaders deliberately attempted to divorce their movement from the agitation surrounding the landless dispute. To assert, however, as John A. Toews does, that such a separation of issues shows that the Mennonite Brethren did not attract members chiefly from the landless class may be drawing an unwarranted conclusion. It may just as well demonstrate that the new church wished to avoid involvement in an explosive economic and social struggle. It would seem not unlikely that a movement, already beset by innumerable pressures and tensions, might well decide to avoid further stress within its membership.

Economic tensions were not limited to the well-known quarrels over the landless issue. Another bitterly divisive confrontation grew out of the "barely dispute,"³⁴ which resulted in the isolation of Ohrloff from the other Mennonite congregations. It created a rift within the church leadership at the very moment when the Mennonite Brethren Church was being born. The letters from Elders Fast and Harder of Ohrloff to the five elders who figured so prominently in the opposition to the new church demonstrated clearly of the latter. It is thus not surprising that Ohrloff refused to join the five elders when they condemned the founders of the Mennonite Brethren. At the same time, it should be noted that the quarrel, which began over a rather insignificant field of barley, eventually involved all major religious and civic leaders of the Molotschna, and poisoned the entire atmosphere, further eroded religious unity, and created a climate of change and ferment which helped to set the stage for the development of the Mennonite Brethren. It thus seems safe to state that economic issues helped to create a situation which fostered a spirit of discontent with existing religious structures.

Several significant interpretations of the Mennonite experience in Russia—amongst which must be included the rise of the Mennonite Brethren Church—have warned against over-emphasizing the religious factors in the Mennonite community in the late 1850s in explaining the upheaval of 1860. David Rempel has noted that a growing spirit of reform was agitating Russia in the middle of the nineteenth century, and the Mennonite world could not be impervious to these stirrings.³⁵ John B. Toews, in several

essays, has demonstrated how the formation of rigid politico-religio-economic structures led to a repressive authoritarianism,³⁶ while Robert Kreider has touched upon a crucial issue by demonstrating that a *Volkskirche*, which by its very nature was inseparably tied to the politics of power, could adapt to quiet, internalized piety but could not accept challenges to external form and ritual,³⁷ since this challenged the ecclesiastical system. Rempel also suggested that the personal ambition of some of the leaders may well have been a contributing factor. Indeed, later pursuit and incredible abuse of power by outspoken leaders such as Benjamin Becker lends credence to such an assumption.³⁸ Another fascinating dimension has been suggested by Alan Peters in his study of the close family ties among a significant number of the early leaders.³⁹ It seems almost certain that at least some early members were attracted to the new movement because of this factor.

A theme common to a number of Mennonite writers is the view that the Mennonite Brethren were justified in their call for renewal, but that this desire need not have brought schism in the larger brotherhood. Some contemporary observers applauded the goals but could not condone the means. Thus, the elders, Bernhard Fast and Johann Harder, emphatically agreed that the congregations were badly in need of renewal.⁴⁰ The way to correct the error, however, they contended, was to work for renewal from within. Even Elder August Lenzmann, who later became a most determined opponent of the new movement, at first expressed support for the goals of the reformers, and was prepared to work for revitalization.⁴¹

Similar expressions of concern are reflected in the *Mennonitische Blaetter*. This paper was especially important because the Russian Mennonites at this time did not have their own periodicals. Numerous articles and lengthy letters in the early 1860s presented both sides in the dispute. Eventually, however, the editor, the respected Pastor Jakob Mannhardt of the Danzig Mennonite Church, emphatically opposed the development of what he regarded as a divisive and destructive force. He concluded that the "spiritual pride" of the "erring brethren"⁴² was at the heart of the problem. He hoped that a rebirth of Christian humility and love would end the rupture. At the same time he noted that

the detached position of the Ohrloff congregation divided the Mennonite leadership precisely when it so desperately needed unity. It would be unfair to editor Mannhardt to dismiss him as someone who placed little emphasis on genuine spiritual vitality and was primarily concerned with retention of ritualistic formalism. In earlier issues, he had repeatedly carried sympathetic reports of Bible study meetings and missionary festivals, and he viewed these as hopeful signs on the Russian horizon. Indeed, he had earlier expressed concern for spiritual conditions in South Russia. For him, however, the formation of a schismatic group seemed a tragic mistake which could only bring more bitterness and deterioration.

Another contemporary account, but from a non-Mennonite, came from the pen of Alexander Klaus.⁴³ In his capacity as an official in the Ministry of Crown Lands he was in a good position to observe life in the colonies. In his analysis of various movements and events in the decades prior to 1860, he concluded that significant motivation for the rise of new religious movements among the Mennonites was presented by the economical problems. He also suggested that earlier tensions, such as the emergence of Flemish and Frisian congregations, had left an enduring legacy which made division a common part of the Mennonite landscape.⁴⁴ This tension was ready to surface when occasion warranted. Similarly, Klaus contended that what he called the "lust for power of the church elders"⁴⁵ added to feelings of alienation in the Mennonite community. Then, when the bitter struggle between the landless settlers and the landowners dragged on without resolution, impatient elements, Klaus contended, turned to religious protest, and began to use the church as a focus of their discontent.⁴⁶ This procedure was regarded as especially appropriate because church leaders were almost always drawn from the ranks of the wealthier classes, and so religious leaders were also seen as agents of economic oppression. Klaus did not interpret the events of 1860 in terms of simple monocausation. While he stressed economic considerations, he did recognize the significance of Baptist and Pietist influences. He did not, however, offer any explanation as to why the leaders of the early Mennonite Brethren were often drawn from the ranks of the well-to-do

business men and farmers, as well as teachers. Beyond that, Klaus is largely uninformed on the inner dynamics of the Mennonite Brethren as his indiscriminate use of the term "*Huepfer*" for the whole movement of religious renewal, both before and after 1860, demonstrates.

One of the more significant recent interpretations of the events of 1860 is to be found in James Urry's *The Closed and the Open: Social and Religious Change Amongst the Mennonites of Russia (1789-1889)*.⁴⁷ Here the new movement is portrayed as a logical religious extension of a whole series of changes which were transforming the Mennonite community during the first half of the nineteenth century. Urry contends that this was a time of increasing emphasis on rugged individualism and aggressive economic practices, as seen in the development of the "*Musterwirte*" and the vigorous industrial enterprises.⁴⁸ The community was being supplanted by the individual. Aggressive self-assertiveness, a relentless drive for success on the individual level, a quest for new exposure and stimulation in the academic arena—these were characteristics which undermined the conservative traditions which fostered continuity, community, and unity. New ideas and new approaches gave birth to new attitudes and values. The Mennonite Brethren were "those brought up in an atmosphere of change, improvement, and achievement. These were the educated men, taught to develop their own personalities and to attempt to change the world and the people around them. But they were also Mennonite: a people taught to realize that all of life was religious, so they searched to find a system which, like their desire to improve the material world around them, encouraged the improvement of faith, and in a world bent on personal achievement, to create a religious person who had achieved their (sic) own salvation. It was these people, the educated, the people who knew and worked outside the confines of the colony and the way it thought, who sought this new religious meaning for their lives."⁴⁹ Urry also suggests that the *Froehliche* phenomenon, the extremists disciplined in the June reform, were at least in part the result of a temporary aberration of some Brethren who were trying to get everyone into the movement. This unhappy experience, Urry concluded, convinced the Brethren to be more careful about whom

they allowed to join their ranks; they promptly returned to their exclusiveness.⁵⁰ Apparently, the early Mennonite Brethren are to be regarded as having developed a world view different from that of the traditional Mennonite community, of stressing aggressive individualism rather than communal responsibility, of being exclusive and elitist rather than inclusive and universal. In their determination to emphasize their distinctiveness, the early Brethren found a fitting spiritual symbol—that of baptism by immersion. Urry asserts that the mode of baptism had been discussed by the members of the new movement before the secession,⁵¹ and that the adoption of immersion gave the Brethren “The criteria of differentiation which would give their movement sacramental distinctiveness.”⁵²

There is much that is intriguing in the Urry analysis. Many of the early leaders were dynamic champions of change in various dimensions of community life, such as education, business and religious matters. It would seem, however, that it would be more accurate to state that the early Mennonite Brethren rebelled against a situation in which the community had already been overshadowed by the aggressive individual, whether personified in the powerful colony administrators or in authoritarian church elders and ministers. Also, while they championed education, as is evident from the role Johann Claassen and Jakob Reimer played in the founding of a special private school, the disruption at that school, caused by the dismissal of someone noted for his spirituality but not scholarship, and the subsequent appointment of someone in whom these qualities were apparently reversed, suggests that the Brethren were more concerned about spirituality than about scholarship, while their opponents were the ones who fit Urry's model. Furthermore, when Urry speaks of immersionist baptism as having been adopted to emphasize distinctiveness, he fails to give any supporting evidence. His assertion that the Brethren had discussed the mode of baptism before their separation lacks any factual basis, while the available literature on this subject refutes Urry's notion that immersion was adopted because it would distinguish the members of the new movement from the larger Mennonite community.

What, then, are some conclusions which may be drawn from the rather large body of writing which has tried to interpret and explain the rise of the Mennonite Brethren? Are there guidelines which may help us in our present understanding?

In the first place, it would seem that too often the issue has been seen in terms of black and white: either it was right and necessary, or else it was wrong and unnecessary. Such value judgments seem to be especially quickly made if only strictly religious dimensions of the whole question are examined.

Beyond this, it seems essential that the whole issue be seen in its broad historical and cultural context. Religious renewal and agitation had long been part of the South Russian Mennonite experience, as the numerous missions festivals, the revival meetings, the Bible study and prayer meetings, demonstrate. Furthermore, prominent Mennonite leaders, such as Elders Lenzmann, Fast, and Harder, supported these ventures, although they refused to join the new movement when it became a separate entity. At the very least, one must admit that many who were part of spiritual renewal movements remained in the old church. It is therefore impossible to speak of the new Mennonite Brethren Church as a church of serious believers vis-a-vis a church of the uncommitted. A simple black-white juxtaposition is both inaccurate and unfair.

It thus becomes imperative to see the rise of the new movement in broad perspective and in contextual relationship. Among factors which shaped the Mennonite world of 1860, and which influenced the rise of the Mennonite Brethren, are the following:

1. The emergence of a harsh, rigid ecclesiastical system which was expressed perhaps most clearly in the formation of the authoritarian *Kirchenkonvent* in the middle of the nineteenth century. This action concentrated power in the hands of a few leaders, and often deprived local congregations of significant decision-making power.

2. In the civil arena, power was concentrated in the hands of the colony administrator and his office. The inordinate influence of the colony administrator is suggested by the tactics he used to dominate ecclesiastical leaders.

Thus, in both the religious and the civil sphere, the old Anabaptist ideal of congregational participation in decision-making was substantially undermined and often nonexistent. It must, however, be remembered that courageous leaders, such as the elders of Ohrloff, successfully resisted civil authoritarianism, but in so doing also set themselves against most of the religious leaders, thus creating ecclesiastical division so that the early Mennonite Brethren never faced a united front.

3. In economic affairs, a serious imbalance and debilitating injustice had become established. Some $\frac{2}{3}$ of the people in the Molotschna were part of the landless group. Thus, not only were they economically dependent on, and exploited by, the one-third which owned the land, they were also voiceless in the village assembly, for the landless had no right to vote.

4. The decade of the 1850s witnessed a number of sharp clashes within the larger Mennonite community. The "barley dispute", to mention only one, embittered relations among several congregations, and divided Ohrloff from other Molotschna congregations.

5. Another lingering dispute arose in connection with the Brotherhood School. When two of the founders of the school were unable to control the development of the school, they withdrew, and only a few months later they had become leaders in the newly-established Mennonite Brethren Church. Again, one may fairly ask if this is mere coincidence, or were these two men susceptible to ordinary human frailties so that their wounded pride found its cure in the new movement?

Thus, the Mennonite Brethren Church arose in an atmosphere characterized by ecclesiastical rigidity which tended to stifle vigorous congregational development; a politico-ecclesiastical partnership which concentrated power in the hands of the few; a sharp class struggle between the landed and the landless, which poisoned relationships at all levels; a number of acrimonious disputes which pitted congregation against congregation, and member against member. When, in the midst of this turmoil and struggle, the Mennonite Brethren Church came into being, champions of the old order were distressed to see another apparently

divisive and disruptive force taking concrete form. They were convinced that a new division would not bring healing to an already troubled and torn community, and so they opposed the new movement. The Mennonite Brethren leaders, on the other hand, were not convinced that anything less than radical surgery could effect a cure.

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FOOTNOTES

- 1 Jacob P. Bekker, *Origin of the Mennonite Brethren Church*, trans. by D.E. Pauls and A.E. Janzen (Hillsboro, Kansas, 1973).
- 2 *Ibid.*, p. 31.
- 3 *Ibid.*, p. 41.
- 4 *Ibid.*, p. 42.
- 5 Friesen, *Die Alt-Evangelische Mennonitische Bruederschaft in Russland, 1789-1910* (Halbstadt, Taurien, 1911), pp. 206ff.
- 6 *Ibid.*, pp. 236ff.
- 7 Peter Regier, *Kurzgefasste Geschichte der Mennoniten-Bruedergemeinde* (Berne, Ind., 1901).
- 8 J.F. Harms, *Die Geschichte der Mennoniten Bruedergemeinde* (Hillsboro, Kansas, 1924).
- 9 J.H. Lohrenz, *The Mennonite Brethren Church* (Hillsboro, Kansas, 1950).
- 10 A.H. Unruh, *Die Geschichte der Mennoniten-Bruedergemeinde* (Winnipeg, 1955).
- 11 See especially p. 62.
- 12 John A. Toews, *A History of the Mennonite Brethren Church* (Fresno, Calif., 1975).
- 13 *Ibid.*, pp. 51, 52. See also, by the same author, "Reflections on Mennonite Brethren Historiography," *Direction*, III (July 1974), 222.
- 14 Toews, *History of the Mennonite Brethren Church*, p. 36.
- 15 Friesen, *Mennonitische Bruederschaft*, p. 236.
- 16 "The Mennonite Brethren Church" in C.J. Dyck, ed., *An Introduction to Mennonite History* (Scottsdale, Pa., 1957); "The Early Mennonite Brethren Church: Baptist or Anabaptist?" *Mennonite Life*, XXV (October, 1959), 176-178.
- 17 "Born of Anabaptism and Pietism," in *Mennonite Brethren Herald* (March 26, 1965).

- 18 John Horsch, *Mennonites in Europe* (Scottdale, Pa., 1950).
- 19 *Ibid.*, p. 278.
- 20 C.H. Wedel, *Abriss der Geschichte der Mennoniten*, III (Newton, Kansas, 1901), 171.
- 21 Carl H.A. van der Smissen, *Kurzgefasste Geschichte und Glaubenslehre der Altevangelischen Taufgesinnten oder Mennoniten* (Selbstverlag, 1895).
- 22 C. Henry Smith, *History of the Mennonites* (Berne, Ind., 1941).
- 23 Cornelius Krahn, *History of the Mennonites*, 4th ed., revised and enlarged (Newton, Kansas, 1957).
- 24 Smith, *History of the Mennonites*, 1957 ed., p. 435.
- 25 Cornelius Krahn, "Some Social Attitudes of the Mennonites in Russia," *Mennonite Quarterly Review*, IX (1935), 173.
- 26 Alexander Klaus, *Unsere Kolonien*, trans. from the Russian by J. Toews (Odessa, 1887), pp. 267, 284-289 *inter alia*.
- 27 Adolf Ehrt, *Das Mennonitentum in Russland von seiner Einwanderung bis zur Gegenwart* (Langensalza, 1932), p. 59.
- 28 Franz Isaak, *Die Molotschnaer Mennoniten* (Halbstadt, Russia, 1908), p. 174.
- 29 E.K. Francis, "The Mennonite Commonwealth in Russia, 1789-1914: A Sociological Interpretation," *Mennonite Quarterly Review*, XXV (1951), 173-182, 200.
- 30 See especially pp. 51, 52.
- 31 Toews, *History of the Mennonite Brethren Church*, p. 52.
- 32 *Ibid.*, p. 174.
- 33 David G. Rempel, "The Mennonite Commonwealth in Russia: A Sketch of Its Founding and Endurance, 1789-1919," *Mennonite Quarterly Review*, XLVIII (January, 1974), p. 25.
- 34 See especially Isaak, *Molotschnaer Mennoniten*, pp. 123-135; also Friesen, *Mennonitische Bruederschaft*, p. 109; Bekker, *Origin*, pp. 48, 49. Bekker asserts flatly that this issue led Ohrloff to refuse support to the other

church leaders as they attempted to crush the secessionists.

- 35 David Rempel, "The Mennonite Commonwealth in Russia: A Sketch of its Founding and Endurance, 1789-1919," *Mennonite Quarterly Review*, XLVII (October, 1973), 259-308; XLVIII (January, 1974), 5-54. See also, by the same author, "The Mennonite Colonies in New Russia. A Study of Their Settlement and Economic Development from 1789 to 1914," PhD. dissertation, Stanford, 1933.
- 36 John B. Toews, "Die Entwicklung der Mennonitischen Kirche in Russland," *Heimatsbuch der Deutschen aus Russland* (Stuttgart, 1972), pp. 419-431; "The Russian Origins of the Mennonite Brethren: Some Observations," in Paul Toews, ed., *Pilgrims and Strangers* (Fresno, 1977), pp. 78-107.
- 37 Robert Kreider, "The Anabaptist Conception of the Church in the Russian Mennonite Environment, 1789-1870," *Mennonite Quarterly Review*, XXV (January 1951), pp. 17-33.
- 38 Becker's rash use of the ban against those who questioned his harsh and despotic rule illustrates his thirst for power (Friesen, *Mennonitische Bruderschaft*, pp. 416ff.).
- 39 Alan Peters, "The Impact of the Family in Mennonite History: Some Observations," *Direction*, I (July 1972), 74-81.
- 40 Friesen, *Mennonitische Bruderschaft*, pp. 234-236.
- 41 *Ibid.*, p. 233.
- 42 Jakob Mannhardt, *Mennonitische Blaetter* (Danzig), editorial (July, 1864), p. 52. Mannhardt referred to the "geistlichen Hochmuth" of the "irrenden Brueder."
- 43 Klaus was a Volga German and served in several ministries of the Tsarist government in St. Petersburg. When he wrote *Unsere Kolonien*, he was an official in the Ministry of Crown Lands.
- 44 Klaus, *Unsere Kolonien*, p. 260.
- 45 *Ibid.*, p. 263.
- 46 *Ibid.*, p. 259.
- 47 James Urry, "The Closed and the Open: Social and

Religious Change Amongst the Mennonites of Russia (1789-1889)," unpublished thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, Keble College, Oxford, 1975.

48 *Ibid.*, p. 524.

49 *Ibid.*, p. 660.

50 *Ibid.*, p. 662.

51 *Ibid.*, p. 628.

52 *Ibid.*, p. 629. Frank Epp makes the same observation in his *Mennonites in Canada, 1786-1920* (Toronto, 1974), p. 173. No substantiation is given.

THE GERMAN-RUSSIAN TENSIONS AMONG THE MENNONITES IN RUSSIA (1789-1917)

Harry Loewen

In the Foreword to this monumental work on the Mennonites in Russia, P.M. Friesen states:

To that I wish to add that, over a period of forty years as a consequence of my profession, the German and Russian languages have vied for supremacy with one another in me, and there was a time when my German did not want to flow properly.¹

This statement, written more than a hundred years after the Mennonites left Prussia for the steppes of southern Russia, reveals more about the German-speaking Mennonites than appears on the surface. It tells us not only about the difficulties that the historian and author P.M. Friesen faced in writing his story, but it reveals more significantly the tension that existed between the German-Mennonite oriented feeling and way of life on the one hand, and the pressure, however indirect and subtle, that the Russian environment exerted on the settlers on the other. For Mennonite intellectuals like P.M. Friesen, the Russian language and culture were most attractive, and they felt that their fellow Mennonites should appreciate and accept the language and culture of their adopted country. The interesting fact, however, is that P.M. Friesen did not write his history in Russian but in German, the language that was generally understood and dear to the hearts of his would-be readers.² In reading P.M. Friesen's book one has the feeling that however awkward and stilted his German often is, the "souls" of both the author and the people of whom he wrote could best be expressed in the German language.

It is the purpose of this essay to trace the tension that existed between the German and Russian languages and ways of life among the Mennonites of Russia, probe into the reasons for the Mennonites' resistance to the Tsarist

government's efforts of russification, account for the Mennonites' relative success in maintaining the German language and their way of life for so long, and finally draw some conclusions from the study. The areas to be considered in which the German-Russian tension manifested itself most of all, were the Mennonites' contacts with their neighbours, their educational institutions, their missionary activities, their attitude to Tsarist Russia, their problems relating to conscription and alternative service, and, finally, questions with regard to their emigration.

The Mennonites in Prussia. For about 200 years before their migration to Russia, the Dutch Mennonites lived in Polish and later Prussian territories of the Vistula Delta. The Polish nobles and landowners extended to the industrious and useful Mennonites religious freedom and toleration. During the partitions of Poland in the 18th century, Danzig and West-Prussia came under the rule of the Hohenzollerns who were less tolerant toward the non-resistant aliens in their regions. The Mennonites in the Vistula Delta continued to speak Dutch, although with time their Dutch language was modified by the Low-German dialect spoken in the area.

Connections between Holland and the Danzig Mennonites, by correspondence and visits, remained strong as long as the Dutch language was used in church and in the home. The well-to-do Mennonites of Danzig even sent their sons to Amsterdam to complete their education or to learn a business. These young sons were often baptized in Holland before returning to West-Prussia.³ In the 18th century, with a decline in contacts with the Netherlands, High German began to take the place of the Dutch language in the church services. As early as 1671 George Hansen lamented that the young people of West Prussia read German better than Dutch.⁴ By the middle of the 18th century the Mennonite ministers began to preach in German, and after the death of the influential Hans van Steen in 1781, who spoke and wrote exclusively in Dutch, the change to German made more rapid progress. When in 1762 the minister of the Mennonite church of Danzig wished to preach the first German sermon in that city, he had to receive special permission, but the congregation, it is of interest to note, did not appreciate the sermon in the

German language. The first German Mennonite hymnal, replacing the Dutch, was printed in 1761, and in the 1780's the church records in Danzig were kept in German.⁵ While the High German gradually invaded the Mennonite churches in West Prussia, in the homes Low German with Polish and German influences was spoken.

As far as the attitude of the Mennonites toward the Prussian rulers was concerned, the Mennonites remained submissive subjects inspite of the intolerance they experienced from local officials and from the Prussian kings. To say, as Frank Epp does, that there was among the Mennonites "a flirtation with German politics that had begun with the Fredericks of Prussia and which survived the Third Reich",⁶ may be true in only rare instances. There is little evidence that patriotism existed among the Prussian Mennonites. The contrary seems to have been the rule. For example, when D. van Riesen became a Prussian soldier in 1815 without compulsion from the government, he was excommunicated and not readmitted because he did not show signs of true repentance. When legal steps were taken in the matter against the Mennonite Church, the Prussian courts ruled that van Riesen had no case against the church because he had acted contrary to church policies.⁷ In general, the Mennonites in Prussia remained largely aliens even after 200 years of sojourn in that country. With the exception of a few enlightened rulers, notably Frederick II (the Great) who recognized and appreciated the usefulness of the Prussian Mennonites, the Mennonites were discriminated against economically, socially and religiously.⁸ Thus when Catherine the Great of Russia invited German farmers and professional people to come to her vast fertile steppes in the south of her country, many Mennonites of the Vistula Delta saw in this the hand of God and responded enthusiastically to the call.

The German-Mennonite Settlers in Russia. In 1789 the first wave of Mennonites, largely the less well-to-do, left Prussia for their new home in what is today central Ukraine. The relationship between the first settlers and the Russian government officials was generally of a congenial nature although there were initial difficulties with regard to broken promises by the Russians and various misunderstandings. The Mennonites were given material assistance, large

tracks of land on both sides of the Dniepr River, privileges which ensured their religious practices, and freedom to establish their educational system and way of life. The Mennonites were practically given a free hand to establish their own state in Russia.

The connections with Prussia were at first kept alive through ever new waves of immigrants and through spiritual support from the homeland. Because the first settlers had no ministers among them, the Prussian churches felt responsible for the immigrants' spiritual life. Thus Elder Cornelius Warkentin came from Prussia to Chortitza in 1794 to organize Mennonite church life and extend to his brethren much-needed spiritual counsel. He was highly honoured by the Russian government and his efforts were appreciated by the Mennonite settlers. For the Mennonites colonists he was both a link between their old and new homes and a much-appreciated spiritual leader.⁹ More than that, Elder Warkentin in a sense symbolized Prussian-Mennonite superiority and know-how with regard to church life and organization. It was thus natural that the Mennonites transplanted to their new home not only their religious institutions but also their Prussian practices in most areas of life. Add to this the complete isolation of the Mennonites in southern Russia, and it becomes understandable that in the first decades of their history in Russia there was no thought given to adopting any Russian customs and practices.

The Mennonites were not the only group that responded to the Russian Tsar's invitation to come to Russia. German colonists, mostly Lutherans and Catholics, came to live near the Mennonite settlements and along the Volga River. There was, however, from the outset some ambivalence about the national or ethnic difference between the Mennonites and the German colonists. A.A. Klaus, a 19th-century official in the Ministry of Crown Lands, differentiated between the Mennonites and the Germans.¹⁰ David G. Rempel states categorically that "the term 'German' does not apply to the Mennonites, who constitute an entirely separate category of settlers. We request that our readers keep this in mind all along, since the current distinction between the German colonists and the Mennonites has been adopted in official acts as well as by

us.”¹¹ And E.K. Francis insists that the Mennonites in Russia “developed into a separate people, socially independent and clearly distinct from both the larger Russian society and other German-speaking colonies in that country.”¹²

While the Mennonites in Russia remained largely aloof not only from their Russian neighbours but also from the German colonists, there were many ties that united the Mennonites and Lutheran and Catholic German colonists. Both the Mennonites and the German settlers came from Germany; both groups spoke the German language and sought to preserve their language and ways of life; and both groups left Russia toward the end of the 19th and early 20th centuries for similar reasons. What separated the Mennonites from their German neighbours was their distinct faith, their long history of persecution, and their Low-German dialect; and while the German colonists sang their German songs with contents that praised their unknown land of origin,¹³ the Mennonites sang their hymns in German also. Thus for all practical purposes the Mennonites were German Mennonites who thought of themselves as German Mennonite people with a distinct history and tradition. When Slavophiles later criticized the German-speaking groups in Russia, the Mennonites were included among those “aliens” who were considered to be Germans and sympathizers of the German fatherland. The fact that the Mennonites had developed a distinct Mennonite identity in Russia did not impress some of the nationally minded Russians in the least. The Mennonites, according to the Slavophiles, were a group of people who with the other German colonists had become prosperous in Russia at the expense of Russians.

Mennonites and their Russian neighbours. Since the Mennonite colonies were isolated from the Russian society and generally unfamiliar with the Russian language, they were inclined to hold back in a conversation with their Russian neighbours and in time even developed an attitude of distrust towards them. Moreover, from the very beginning Mennonites felt that Russian culture was inferior to their German culture, although this feeling changed among intellectuals toward the end of the 19th century. Frank Epp observes: “As difficult as had been the transition

from Dutch to German in Prussia, that acculturation was eventually recognized as a cultural advancement. In Russia there could only be a cultural debasement."¹⁴ And Robert Kreider points out: "The surrounding Russian culture was of such an inferior socio-economic character, that it was distinctly disadvantageous for anyone to separate himself from the Mennonite colonies."¹⁵ Both the Mennonites and the German colonists often thought of the Russians as lazy and more or less contemptible people.¹⁶ Mennonite children were rarely given Russian names, although the Russian diminutives of at least some names were popular among the Mennonites.¹⁷ The Russian servants and workers on Mennonite farms and in factories were merely hired labourers and the relationship between them and their Mennonite bosses was cool and sometimes strained. With time the younger Mennonites learned to sing some Russian folk songs and acquired the Russian language, but in general the Russian ways remained foreign to the Mennonites until the end of the 19th century.

Mennonite education in Russia. In the area of education the Mennonites in Russia sought to preserve and cultivate the German language as long as possible. According to C. Henry Smith, the primary aim of the whole educational system in Russia was "to perpetuate the German language and to save the children for the faith of the fathers."¹⁸ Heinrich Heese, Sr., however, recognized the need for teaching and learning the Russian language in the Mennonite schools. Not only was he the first teacher to teach the Russian language, which incidentally, was much appreciated by Johann Cornies, but he was also, until his death in 1860, an enthusiastic Russian patriot.¹⁹ Heinrich Franz, Sr., Heese's successor, was not as knowledgeable of the Russian language as Heese. P.M. Friesen writes of him:

Franz never really acquired an adequate command of the Russian language, especially in practical terms. It would appear that he also never was wholeheartedly devoted to it, and that it was more difficult for him than for Heese to learn to feel in Russian His language was an elegant, grammatically correct High German of the educated classes in Prussia²⁰

As late as the mid-nineteenth century all subjects in

the Menonite schools were taught in German, although in the 1870's the Mennonites began to realize that the days of the German language in their schools were numbered. With the pressure of russification upon them, the teachers of the Chortitza *Centralschule* decided "that the Russian language was no longer treated as a foreign language, but as a second mother tongue."²¹ By agreeing to introduce the Russian language into their schools the Mennonites hoped to preserve their privileges, or, failing that, to modify the russification policies of the government. In a petition of November 15, 1875, for example, the Mennonites pleaded with the Russian government that they might be allowed to retain their privileges and educational system, adding, "... At the same time we obligate ourselves, out of a sense of duty to our dear fatherland, to promote the language of the land with the greatest diligence."²²

To meet the increasing demand for more qualified high school teachers, Mennonites began to attend teacher training institutes and universities in Russia and Western Europe, especially Germany. In the Russian universities Russian was the only language of communication, but the Mennonite students continued to speak High German and Low German among themselves.²³ However, when the Mennonites returned as teachers to their colonies they not only taught the literature of such Russian authors as Pushkin, Turgenev, Gogol, and Tolstoy, but they also contributed actively to promoting the Russian language in Mennonite secondary schools and teacher training institutions. P.M. Friesen, for example, was one such outstanding promoter of things Russian among the Mennonites of Russia.

It was, however, primarily the business activities of the Mennonites which drew the Mennonites and Russians closer together. Around 1900 the Mennonites established business enterprises in towns and cities throughout southern Russia. This extension of Mennonite business into the Russian communities registered the beginning of the end of Mennonite isolation in Russia. According to David Rempel, the Mennonite business families who established their homes in the Russian towns no longer sent their children to Chortitza, Halbstadt, Gnadenfeld or Ohrloff to attend Mennonite secondary schools; these children continued

their education in the gymnasias, schools of commerce, and other schools in the areas of their families' new abode.²⁴ With the knowledge of the Russian language, the breakdown of isolation, and an increasing material prosperity, Mennonites around the turn of the century began to undertake longer vacation trips to the Caucasian Mountains and the Crimea; however, trips to summer resorts in Switzerland and Germany were more common than travels to Russian vacation centres.²⁵

Mennonites and mission activities in Russia. With regard to missions and evangelism among the Russian population there exists some misconception. It has been commonly assumed that since the Russian Tsars had prohibited proselytizing among the Russian Orthodox population, there was hardly any missionary activity by Mennonites in Russia. To be sure, Catherine the Great's Manifesto of 1763 stated that all newcomers to Russia were free to exercise their religion, but that they were not to propagandize their faith among the Russian Orthodox subjects. However, the first agreement between the Mennonite settlers and the Russian government was dated March 3, 1788, which was twenty-five years after Catherine's Manifesto. Neither this first agreement of 1788 nor any subsequent agreement contained a clause restricting mission work in Russia. "It is likely that very few Mennonites who settled in Russia ever heard of the restricting clause of the Manifesto of 1763."²⁶ It is of note that especially the "Mennonite Brethren did not maintain the strict separation from the non-Mennonite world as their forefathers had done. They sought fellowship with similar religious groups in Russia and abroad."²⁷ There were numerous instances where Mennonites had religious contacts with Russians; they read the Bible with them in Russian and even greeted each other with the holy kiss.²⁸ P.M. Friesen states that the Mennonites respected the faiths of other Protestant groups, that they generally refrained from propagandizing among members of other Christian groups, but that they also believed that the command of Christ to proclaim the Gospel was valid for all time.²⁹ Moreover, according to Friesen the Mennonites would not discourage any Russian who wished to join them voluntarily. It should also be noted that the Mennonites contributed to both Russian and

German missionary endeavours, but according to Friesen, they refrained from direct missionary propaganda: "Missionary activity as propaganda in the direct sense of the word is carried on by us only among non-Christian peoples."³⁰ The question of Mennonite missions in Russia thus remains ambivalent.

Mennonites and Russian patriotism. P.M. Friesen goes to great lengths in his attempt to counter those Slavophiles who accuse the German colonists and Mennonites of unpatriotic feelings and attitudes toward their adopted country. Especially A.A. Welizyn's charge, that the Germans have no right to be in Russia when their hearts are in Berlin,³¹ is disproved by Friesen by quoting other Russian writers, notably P.W. Kamensky and P. Alabin, who praise the Mennonites for sacrificing their money, goods, time and themselves in an attempt to help Russian soldiers in the Crimean and Russo-Japanese wars.³² Friesen comments: "... May our lives testify that we love God, His church and mankind, our Tsar, our fatherland, and our fellow citizens, with a warm, grateful and active love!"³³

This love for the Russian fatherland goes back to the very beginning of the Mennonites' sojourn in Russia and was no doubt due to the friendliness, honour, and privileges which the Tsars extended to the Mennonites. Many Mennonites, especially the intellectuals among them, felt that it was not sufficient to merely be grateful to Russia, but that the Mennonites owed Russia an active patriotism. Friesen voices these feelings of patriotism when he writes:

We also believe that as subjects, citizens and Christians we will not only be able to live in Russia with an untroubled conscience, but that we will also be able to stand as a patriotic, culturally-useful, small member in the large family of Russia (into which we have been adopted by Divine Providence), and will learn to do this more and more as a total body.³⁴

This positive Mennonite attitude toward the powers that be may have found its first extensive historical manifestation among the Mennonites in Russia. In his book, *Geschichte der Wehrlosen Taufgesinnten Gemeinden*, published in 1873, Martin Klassen expresses an attitude of awe and reverence toward the monarchs of his time, especially those of Russia.

As Walter Klaassen observes in a review of this book, "Not a single negative reference to any Prussian or Russian monarch can be found," and Russia is portrayed as the uncorrupted land in contrast to morally decaying Western Europe.³⁵

While German patriotism was virtually non-existent among Mennonites in Prussia, Russian patriotism seems to have been widespread among Mennonite intellectuals. The Prussian-born Heinrich Heese, Sr., was an extreme Russian patriot. During the Crimean War he extolled the Tsar and concluded that Russia was no less civilized and cultured than England and France, and that Russia was the land where God would preserve his elect.³⁶ P.M. Friesen observes: "It is not the exaggerated pathos of his poetic patriotism that is interesting, but the fact that he, the born Prussian and Lutheran, and now Russian Mennonite, carried over so completely the Prussian 'Crusade-Patriotism' onto Russian soil."³⁷ Friesen adds that Heese's patriotism was quite general among the Mennonites in Russia.³⁸

The outstanding example of Russian patriotism is Bernhard Harder, minister, teacher and poet. He calls Russia his "dear fatherland," the Tsarina is the "noblest of women" and *Landesmutter*, and those who wage war against Russia are "Satan's servants and partners."³⁹ His extreme patriotic attitude toward the Russian state and the Tsar is expressed well in the following stanza of one of his poems:

Auch wir Mennoniten stehen,
Herrscher, in dem Beter-Chor:
Hoffnungsvoll und dankbar sehen
Liebend wir zu Dir empor,
Stehend an des Thrones Stufen,
Wo in unserm schwachen Teil
Wir mit einer Stimme rufen:
"Heil dir, Landesvater, Heil!"⁴⁰

When toward the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th centuries political winds of change began to blow through Russia, especially among the Russian intellectuals and students, the Mennonites were not influenced by them.

In fact, the Mennonites, belonging to the materially well-to-do classes, favoured the conservative forces which tried to maintain the status quo. According to Friesen, the Mennonites would have moved even more to the "right" had it not been for the fear of what the Russian nationalists might do to their religious, civic, and educational privileges.⁴¹ Friesen continues:

If the extreme confessionism and nationalism of the 'truly Russian people' had not been manifested in such a crass manner, at least seventy-five percent of the Mennonites—'for the sake of the Tsar' and out of fear and antipathy to democracy, socialism, and everything that smelled of revolution—would have been 'truly Russian people' in the monarchical, patriotic, and social sense.⁴²

It may be of interest to note that while attending Russian universities, the Mennonite students were little influenced by the political movements among the Russian students.⁴³

Mennonites and conscription. While the patriotism of the Mennonites was sincere and genuine, there is no doubt that the conscription issue in the 1870's tested severely the good-will that the Mennonites had toward the Russian government. As a result of the government's new conscription laws and Russification policies, Mennonite deputies travelled to St. Petersburg repeatedly in an effort to maintain the special status of the Mennonites in Russia. It seems that the Mennonites would have fared better with the officials in St. Petersburg had they been more diplomatic and had they known the Russian language better. Moreover, it seems that their pleas for continued recognition of their privileges would have been more successful had they demonstrated earlier greater willingness to learn the Russian language. In 1871 six deputies were sent to St. Petersburg in connection with the conscription issue. P.M. Friesen notes that two of these deputies knew Russian well, one knew the written language of the government's chancery only, and the two elders among the group did not know Russian at all. The Minister of Crown Lands criticized the deputies for their lack of knowledge of the Russian language:

The Minister regretted the fact that the two elders, after a seventy-year stay of the Mennonites in Russia, could not speak the Russian language and declared this a sin. Minister Epp's assurance that efforts were being made to make up for this neglect, he answered with: "Too late!"⁴⁴

When in 1873 another delegation traveled to the Russian capital on behalf of the non-resistance position of the Mennonites, the deputies were surprised to find that the Grand Duke Constantine Nikolievitch could speak German with them. Again the Mennonites were criticized, although this time not because of their ignorance of Russian. "We had been in Russia for 70 or 80 years" Friesen reports the Grand Duke as saying, "and enriched ourselves and had enjoyed protection and favor: now we were to recognize our duty to do something for the fatherland."⁴⁵ On another occasion Mennonite deputies were reminded that it was difficult to take them seriously with regard to their peace principle when the Ministry in St. Petersburg had a room-full of files concerning the quarrels and fights among the Mennonites and that on several occasions the government had to step in in order to settle their differences.⁴⁶ In a petition to the Tsar of 1874 the Mennonites agreed to do alternative service, such as medical and forestry work, and promised to learn and teach the Russian language more diligently in their schools.⁴⁷ It is significant to note, however, that the Mennonites preferred the forestry service to any other non-combatant involvement because the forest camps provided them with the isolation they required to cultivate their faith and to preserve their way of life. In the forest camps the Mennonites continued to speak their High and Low German languages.

When the war broke out in 1914 some Mennonites sympathized with the Russian cause while others were more inclined toward Germany and its military efforts. The majority no doubt stood somewhere in between these two attitudes, trying to maintain their independence of feeling as well as existence.⁴⁸ Throughout World War I the Mennonites served in alternative, non-combatant areas, with half of the men serving in the Semstvo Union, which was a

local patriotic organization formed to help and care for the wounded and sick.⁴⁹

Emigration to America. However conciliatory the Russian government was toward the Mennonites and their concerns for special status, the general program of Russification, the questions with regard to military service, and the possible loss of Mennonite privileges, caused many Russian Mennonites to cast their eyes toward America. The eventual Mennonite exodus from Russia in the second half of the 19th century brought about a psychological split between those who felt that Russia had in a sense betrayed them and those who argued that the Mennonites had no right to desert their fatherland. In a passage entitled "The Significance of Emigration," P.M. Friesen states that those who decided to leave for America were landless and narrow-minded Mennonites who refused to accept the Russian culture, identified German with Mennonitism, did not know the Russian language well, did not appreciate the rich literature and philosophy of Russia, did not approve of young Mennonite studying in Russian institutions, and who identified Pan-Slavism with nihilism.⁵⁰ According to David Rempel, the landed Mennonites, the preachers, and the more progressive individuals recognized the need for educational reforms and were satisfied with the newly enacted alternative forestry service and hence they saw no need for emigration.⁵¹ Those who remained in Russia even suspected the motives of the emigrants. Elder Jakob Wiebe in a letter to a fellow-elder suggests that the emigrants disdain the Russians on the one hand and lust after prosperity in America on the other. He continues:

In the beginning some religious considerations may have contributed towards this cause but that is no longer the case. At this time there is only the attraction of friendship, the (hopefully) golden mountains, curiosity and, most of all, the fear of sending their sons into service. Mostly the people leaving are those who have no understanding of non-resistance or Christianity.⁵²

Others tried to dissuade would-be emigrants by arguing that Mennonites owed Russia a great deal for having received them nearly a hundred years ago, that they were brought to Russia to witness to the grace of God and to

fulfill the divine will, and that Russia needed their economic and cultural contributions.⁵³ America, on the other hand, was portrayed by some as a land in which the scum of society gathered.⁵⁴ However, despite the efforts of the Russian government and influential Mennonites to discourage the restless colonists, one third of the Mennonite population left Russia prior to the Revolution of 1917.

Aside from the wisdom that comes with hindsight, in probing the pronouncements of those who suspected the emigrants of base motives, one cannot but feel that the Mennonites who chose to remain in Russia merely paid lip-service to the Russian language, culture, and things Russian and were not all that concerned about contributing their skills, knowledge and spiritual values to Russia and its people. With the exception of a few Mennonite intellectuals like P.M. Friesen, most Mennonites who remained in Russia did so because they found it difficult to give up their comforts, prosperity, and isolated Mennonite existence. Had they been more in touch with what was really happening politically in Russia, they would have seen the handwriting on the wall and possibly left for America as well. As it was, while a few individuals accepted and appreciated the culture of Russia, the majority of the Mennonites continued to speak, preach, and even publish in German well into the 20th century.⁵⁵ It took the revolutionary years of 1917 and the aftermath of World War I not only to silence the German voice but also destroy the German-Mennonite world in Russia.

Conclusion

1. The Mennonites left Prussia for Russia for religious and economic reasons. Like their Anabaptist forefathers they wandered in search of a home and religious freedom. Russia under the Tsars provided them with what they desired. When some of the Mennonites later developed an intense love for their adopted country, it was an expression of gratitude toward the Tsars and not political nationalism.

2. The majority of the Mennonites in Russia did not identify with Russians and Russian culture, and indeed had no desire for such identification. In the southern steppes they were too isolated to become one with their new

fatherland, and the cultural level of the Russian peasants was seen by the Mennonites as being below their own level. The Russian people in the Mennonite towns and villages were either used as workers in Mennonite factories and farms, or else they were regarded as souls to be saved.

3. To preserve their way of life the Mennonites cultivated the High German language and the Low German dialect. The German language was not sacred to them just because it was German; it was a means to an end, the end being the preservation of the Mennonite identity. When the Russian government's attempts at russification became intense, the Mennonites tended to dig in their heels and maintain German at all costs, for they believed that with the loss of German they would also lose their separateness and their island position within a Russian sea. When in the second half of the 19th century the Mennonites began to teach and learn Russian in the schools, they did so because they had no other choice and at the same time hoped to use the language issue as a lever to move the government in favour of their special status position. For most Mennonites the Russian culture and language remained foreign. As late as the beginning of the 20th century people like P.M. Friesen had to plead with their fellow-Mennonites for greater effort in learning the Russian language.⁵⁶ It is well known that up to World War I the minutes of conferences were still recorded in German and that only those documents were written in Russian which dealt with government matters.⁵⁷

4. While the Mennonites of Russia spoke German and thought of themselves as German people, there is no evidence to suggest that they were ever German patriots or excessively nationalistic in their feeling for Germany. As Josef Ponten comments in his novel *Im Wolgaland* which touches the Mennonites briefly: "The Mennonite had no conception of Germany; he did not even so much as refer to it. What was Germany for these people from the Volga was heaven for this man from the steppes."⁵⁸ Mennonites studied in Germany and Switzerland and they also travelled occasionally in Germany, but sociologically and culturally they remained aliens in the country in which their forefathers had been oppressed and persecuted.

5. While Germany remained for the Russian Mennonites a foreign land, German as a language, especially the Low-German dialect, had become for the Mennonites their *Muttersprache*. The German language thus not only helped the Mennonites to preserve their faith and their way of life, but German was also the language of their soul. To quote Ponten again: "Language is soul; for that reason a mother tongue is retained for such a long time. It is not so much the different character that makes foreign lands seem strange as it is the different language."⁵⁹ It seems that it is only with the gradual loss of its language that an ethnic group or a people begins to identify with another society and culture. Gerhard Reimer observes in a recent statistical study about German as mother tongue among Indiana Mennonites: "The rapid decline of German between the present college generation and their parents. . .coincides closely with the rapid acculturation that has taken place among Indiana Mennonites since World War II."⁶⁰

6. Prior to World War I there were signs of an increasing willingness among the Mennonite intellectuals to adopt the Russian language and culture without necessarily giving up their Mennonite faith and distinctives. One can only speculate on what would have happened to the Mennonite identity and what form it would have taken, had the russification process been allowed to take its gradual course in the Mennonite communities. While we do not know how the Mennonites of Russia would have eventually developed had their communities not been destroyed by the events of 1917, we do know from the experiences of those Mennonites who settled in United States and Canada that the gradual loss of German and the acceptance of the English language and the American way of life does not necessarily destroy the faith and identity of the Mennonite people. It may also be added that throughout history and throughout the world there existed and still exist many Mennonites who never spoke German!

FOOTNOTES

- 1 P.M. Friesen, *The Mennonite Brotherhood in Russia (1789-1910)* (Winnipeg, 1978), p. xxxii.
- 2 It is an ironic twist of history that the first Mennonites in Russia had a meager knowledge of High German and that they had to learn High German in Russia so as to be able to communicate with Russian government officials. David G. Rempel, "The Mennonite Commonwealth in Russia. A Sketch of its Founding and Endurance, 1789-1919," *The Mennonite Quarterly Review*, Vol. 47 (Oct. 1973), No. 4, p. 262.
- 3 *The Mennonite Encyclopedia*. A Comprehensive Reference Work on the Anabaptist-Mennonite Movement, 4 vols. (Scottdale, Pa., 1955), II, 9.
- 4 *Ibid.*, p. 495.
- 5 Cornelius Krahn, "Mennonite Plattdeutsch," *The Mennonite Quarterly Review*, Vol. 33 (July 1959), No. 3, pp. 256-259.
- 6 Frank H. Epp, *Mennonites in Canada, 1786-1920. The History of a Separate People* (Toronto, 1974), p. 176.
- 7 Friesen, *Mennonite Brotherhood*, p. 58.
- 8 Rempel, "The Mennonite Commonwealth," *The Mennonite Quarterly Review*, Vol. 47, p. 280.
- 9 Friesen, *Mennonite Brotherhood*, pp. 50-51.
- 10 Rempel, "The Mennonite Commonwealth," *The Mennonite Quarterly Review*, Vol. 47, p. 295. During World War I there were in Russia apporixmately 2,000,000 German-speaking people, of whom 100 to 120 thousand were Mennonites (5%). *Mennonite Encyclopedia*, IV, 384.
- 11 Rempel, "The Mennonite Commonwealth," *The Mennonite Quarterly Review*, Vol. 47, p. 295.
- 12 E.K. Francis, "The Mennonite Commonwealth in Russia 1789-1914. A Sociological Interpretation," *The Mennonite Quarterly Review*, Vol. 25 (July 1951), No. 3, p. 174.

- 13 J.W. Dyck, *The Problems of the Russo-Germans in the later Works of Josef Ponten* (Unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Michigan, 1956), pp. 123-124.
- 14 Epp, *Mennonites in Canada*, p. 178.
- 15 Robert Kreider, "The Anabaptist Conception of the Church in the Russian Mennonite Environment, 1789-1870," *The Mennonite Quarterly Review*, Vol. 25 (Jan. 1951), No. 1, p. 22.
- 16 Dyck, *The Problems of the Russo-Germans*, p. 123.
- 17 The following names were popular among the Mennonites: Anuta, Petia, Kolia, Katia. Gerhard Wiens, "Russian in Low German," *Mennonite Life*, Vol. 13 (April, 1958), No. 2, p. 77.
- 18 C. Henry Smith, *The Story of the Mennonites*; third edition, revised and enlarged by Cornelius Krahn (Newton, Kansas, 1950), p. 415.
- 19 Friesen, *Mennonite Brotherhood*, pp. 96-97.
- 20 *Ibid.*, pp. 711-712.
- 21 *Ibid.*, p. 757.
- 22 *Ibid.*, p. 604.
- 23 N.J. Klassen, "Mennonite Intelligentsia in Russia," *Mennonite Life*, Vol. 24 (April, 1969), No. 2, p. 54.
- 24 Rempel, "The Mennonite Commonwealth," *The Mennonite Quarterly Review*, Vol 48 (Jan. 1974), No. 1, p. 43.
- 25 Walter Quiring, "Cultural Interaction Among the Mennonites in Russia," *Mennonite Life*, Vol 24 (April, 1969), No. 2, p. 63.
- 26 *The Mennonite Encyclopedia*, IV, 385.
- 27 Kreider, "The Anabaptist Conception of the Church," p. 30.
- 28 Aaron A. Toews, *Mennonitische Martyrer der juengsten Vergangenheit und der Gegenwart*, 2 vols. (Winnipeg, 1949), I, 58.
- 29 Friesen, *Mennonite Brotherhood*, p. 630.
- 30 *Ibid.*, p. 636. In view of such and similar statements concerning religious propaganda it is difficult to believe that the Mennonites were ignorant of the Manifesto of 1763. Concerning alleged religious propaganda by Mennonite Brethren, see pp. 645-650.

- 31 "Was sitzen sie hier, wenn ihr Herz in Berlin ist. . .?"
Ibid., p. 575.
- 32 *Ibid.*, pp. 575-586.
- 33 *Ibid.*, p. 586.
- 34 *Ibid.*, pp. 652-653.
- 35 Walter Klaassen, "A Belated Review: Martin Klaassen's 'Geschichte der Wehrlosen Taufgesinnten Gemeinden' Published in 1873," *The Mennonite Quarterly Review*, Vol. 49 (Jan. 1975), No. 1, pp. 43-52.
- 36 Friesen, *Mennonite Brotherhood*, pp. 702-703.
- 37 *Ibid.*, pp. 704-705.
- 38 *Ibid.*, p. 705.
- 39 Victor Fast, "The Theology of Bernhard Harder," *The Mennonite Quarterly Review*, Vol. 37 (Jan. 1963), No. 1, p. 50.
- 40 *Ibid.* Concerning B. Harder's patriotism Friesen writes: "We could relate many more commendable things about him—his glowing patriotism for Russia, especially in the form of his love for the Tsar. . . ." *Mennonite Brotherhood*, p. 958.
- 41 *Ibid.*, P. 627.
- 42 *Ibid.*, pp. 627-628.
- 43 N.J. Klassen, "Mennonite Intelligentsia in Russia," p. 54.
- 44 Friesen, *Mennonite Brotherhood*, p. 587. See also the somewhat embarrassing and comical misunderstanding between the Mennonite deputies and the representatives of the Russian government on this occasion. *Ibid.*, pp. 587-589.
- 45 *Ibid.*, pp. 588-589. In 1873 Theodor Hans, minister of the Evangelical Herrnhut Brethren Church in St. Petersburg, advised the Mennonites on how they ought to approach government officials more diplomatically. The petitions and documents should be written in Russian and the deputies chosen should know the Russian language well so as to be able to converse with the Grand Duke. *Ibid.*, pp. 601-602.
- 46 *Ibid.*, pp. 1026-1027.
- 47 *Ibid.*, p. 595.
- 48 Cornelius Krahn, "Some Social Attitudes of the Men-

- nonites of Russia," *The Mennonite Quarterly Review*, Vol. 9 (October, 1935), No. 4, p. 175.
- 49 Frank C. Peters, "Non-Combatant Service Then and Now," *Mennonite Life*, Vol. 10 (Jan. 1935), No. 1, pp. 31-35.
- 50 Friesen, *Mennonite Brotherhood*, pp. 592-593.
- 51 Rempel, "The Mennonite Commonwealth," *The Mennonite Quarterly Review*, Vol. 48, p. 41. See also Friesen, *Mennonitische Bruederschaft*, pp. 498-499.
- 52 Friesen, *Mennonite Brotherhood*, pp. 607-608.
- 53 See Leonard Gross, Ivan Friesen, with the collaboration of "Zur Einwanderung russlaendischer Mennoniten nach Nordamerika vor 100 Jahren," *Mennonitische Geschichtsblaetter*, 31. Jahrgang (1974), Neue Folge Nr. 26, pp. 107-113.
- 54 Friesen, *Mennonite Brotherhood*, p. 606.
- 55 John A. Toews, *A History of the Mennonite Brethren Church. Pilgrims and Pioneers*, edited by A.J. Klassen (Fresno, California, 1975), p. 97.
- 56 "Ein Drittel des Unterrichtes in deutsch. Spr. (Rel. u. Deutsch) bei deutschem Gottesdienst und Familiensprache ist genuegend fuer das Deutsch der Mennoniten: die russ. Sprache bedarf einer viel groesseren Kraft und Vorarbeit als die deutsche, weil letztere die heimische Praxis fuer sich hat, welcher die russische bei mehr als 9/10 der Schueler entbehrt. — Ohne engen Connex mit der hoeheren Sprache wenigstens bei unserer mennonitischen 'Intelligenz', den Lehrern etc., sind wir in Russland nicht 'Buerger', sondern halibunmuendige Beisasen!" Friesen, *Mennonitische Bruederschaft*, pp. 608-609.
- 57 *Ibid.*, pp. 526-527.
- 58 Quoted in J.W. Dyck, "The Mennonites in Josef Ponten's Novels," *Mennonite Life*, Vol. 12 (July, 1957), No. 3, p. 137 (Translated).
- 59 Quoted in Dyck, *The Problems of the Russo-Germans*, p. 78 (Translated).
- 60 Gerhard Reimer, "German as Mother Tongue Among Indiana Mennonites," *The Mennonite Quarterly Review*, Vol. 49 (July, 1977), No. 3, p. 246.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF P.M. FRIESEN'S HISTORY FOR MENNONITE BRETHREN SELF-UNDERSTANDING

J.B. Toews

The publication of *The History of the Mennonite Brethren Church* by John A. Toews in 1975 was celebrated with a symposium whose papers reviewed the historical pilgrimage of the Mennonite Brethren brotherhood and posed questions about its current identity.¹ Such discussions about Mennonite Brethren identity have not been limited to formal occasions like the symposium, however. In recent years numerous articles on Mennonite history, theology and identity have appeared in conference periodicals.² These essays reflect the attempt, on the part of the present generation of Mennonite Brethren leaders, to recover as well as to refocus the character and mission of the church. The importance, even necessity, of knowing the past in order to understand the present and find direction for the future is a normal part of man's quest for continuity and vision. As even a monthly letter of the Royal Bank of Canada recently observed:

We are forever indebted to the past, it is the source of our very identity, observed in the present moment which changes as we live it, the past is all we know. Therein lies the secret use of history. We are not seeking to put history under a microscope, to cut it into slices for critical examination. What we do want is to apply the experiences of the past to events today. A spokesman from another age may illuminate our problem and help us to plot our future course.³

Even the message which God addresses to the many generations of the human race in the Scriptures is clothed in the form of human events that illuminate the unchanging nature of God's character as well as his relationship with and purpose for each generation.

The publication of the translation from the German of

P.M. Friesen's *The Mennonite Brotherhood in Russia (1789-1910)* now provides us with another opportunity to examine our present self-understanding in the light of the past. Nor can Friesen's contribution to a self-understanding of the Mennonite Brethren and their mission any longer go unnoticed. Although the full record of his contribution to the life and faith of the brotherhood cannot be adequately covered in the limited space assigned to us, a few selected areas of significance shall be considered.

P.M. Friesen's commitment to historical research and documentation as well as his painstaking concern for objectivity adds to the value of his work. The Mennonite Brethren history he presents is set in the context of the broader Anabaptist and Mennonite pilgrimage, thus providing us with a proper perspective for our own understanding.⁴

A major portion of *The Mennonite Brotherhood in Russia (1789-1910)*⁵ is devoted to the birth and development of the movement which became known as the Mennonite Brethren Church. The assignment to write the book came from the fellowship of the Mennonite Brethren on the occasion of their 25th anniversary. It is important to note that only 373 pages in a book of more than 1,000 pages address the original assignment. The story of the mid-19th century events in Mennonite history is set in the context of the broader Anabaptist movement. The roots of the Mennonite Brethren are traced to the 16th century radical reformation. Friesen narrates this history from diverse historical sources—diaries of Mennonite martyrs, studies by non-Mennonite (e.g., Freiheim, Reiswitz, Wadzeck), as well as Mennonite scholars.⁶ The works of Menno Simons are accorded a central place in the introduction to the founding document of the Mennonite Brethren Church.⁷ The critical chapters on the history of the Mennonite congregations in Holland and Prussia relate the Mennonites in Russia to their forebears in Western Europe.⁸ The history of the Mennonite Church in Russia from 1789 to 1910 pictures the historical setting of the mother church which gave birth to the Mennonite Brethren.⁹ These chapters on Mennonite history indicate clearly the deep struggle for spiritual renewal that occurred in the decades preceeding 1860.¹⁰ A once vibrant evangelical witness had given way to institutional traditionalism concerned mainly

with self-perpetuation by means of cultural exclusivity and economic affluence.

The *Kleine Gemeinde* under the leadership of Klaas Reimer (1812-1819) caused some ripples to run through the Mennonite ecclesiastical power structure in Russia. But, according to Friesen, Reimer did not possess the joyous knowledge of God's grace and his confessional stance in educational and cultural matters was very narrow.¹¹ Nevertheless, Friesen speaks of the *Kleine Gemeinde* as a "messenger calling the Molotschna Mennonites to repentance, but it would appear to us because it was too narrow-minded, too frightened, too isolationist and opposed to education it never made a profound impact."¹²

Serious convulsions within the Mennonite Church occurred as a result of the tensions between conservative and progressive leaders. The relation of Mennonite groups to the Russian Bible Society, differences regarding education, and reaction to the collusion between civil and religious authority plagued the Mennonite Church during the first half of the 19th century.¹³ The spiritual condition of the large Mennonite Church during that period was such¹⁴ that the influence of pietism appeared as a ray of hope for many longing hearts within a spiritually drifting Anabaptist-Mennonite community.

The spiritual awakening which preceeded 1860, largely in opposition to the wishes of the civil and religious authorities, gradually withdrew from the institutional church in order to find liberty and nurture within the fellowship of true believers.

The inception of the mennonite Brethren Church was one of the strongest expressions of this trend. The persecutions that followed from the leaders of the established Mennonite Church and the continuing effort to disenfranchise the newly formed Mennonite Brethren fellowship created tensions which left their mark on the Mennonite Brethren identity. The commitment of the Mennonite Brethren to the principles of faith and life as understood by Menno Simons and the larger Anabaptist community never came into question. The statement of the Document of Secession, "We are in agreement with our dear Menno according to our convictions from the Holy Scriptures,"¹⁵ makes this clear. The question of identity was therefore

never one of basic theological commitment but rather one of relationship, relationship to the broader Mennonite community which rejected it. The expulsion of the Mennonite Brethren from the larger Mennonite community and their possible exile to Siberia in the 1860s was prevented by the Russian authorities in response to the intercession of Elder Johann Harder of Ohrloff.¹⁶ Legal recognition of the Mennonite Brethren as a Mennonite Church fellowship was granted by the Russian government in 1862 over the protest of the majority within the Mennonite ecclesiastical leadership.¹⁷

This rejection of the Mennonite Brethren Church continued during the first half century of its existence. It was once more clearly expressed in Schoenwiese on March 7, 1914. There a larger delegation attempted to exclude the Mennonite Brethren from the official exemption from military service because of the missionary witness of the Brethren, derisively called propaganda efforts (*propagandistische Bestrebungen* — religious propaganda). Having to¹⁸ clarify its position as a Mennonite fellowship before the civil government in response to the concern expressed about its evangelistic and missionary activity by the church after 54 years was a very painful experience for the Mennonite Brethren. This refusal by the majority of the elders from the mother church to recognize the Mennonite Brethren as members of the Mennonite community of faith was difficult for the Mennonite Brethren to accept and was a cause for the growing estrangement between them and the larger Mennonite community.¹⁹

The sufferings and privations that followed World War One (1914-1917) and the October Revolution of 1917 served as effective means to purify the Mennonite fellowship in Russia. These events created a mutual identification not only with regard to historical, but also with regard to spiritual relationships among all Mennonites. The history of the spiritual identification of the two bodies, which developed in the midst of great tribulation, sorrow and death during the years 1918 through 1928, brought healing from the past and a new dimension to their spiritual relationship. This was then followed by mutual recognition and appreciation in the entire Russian Mennonite community.

The tensions described above were brought to the

United States and Canada with the migrations of the 1870s. In their evangelistic zeal, the Mennonite Brethren refused to limit themselves to people outside the Mennonite community and included the Mennonite Church as a field for their evangelism and missions. The tension created by the evangelistic zeal of the Mennonite Brethren has also periodically been a bone of contention among Mennonites involved in the world-wide efforts of MCC, in which Mennonite Brethren have very frequently insisted that the ministry of mercy must be accompanied by the message of salvation. This did not find general acceptance among other Mennonite groups who wished to limit such evangelization to the personal witness of some of the MCC workers.

On the other side of the ledger, we must also recognize that the missionary and evangelistic zeal of the Mennonite Brethren, and their emphasis on salvation as a personal experience—a heritage that has come to the Mennonites from the pietistic movement in Europe—was responsible for the development of an attitude towards other Mennonites which can best be described as “a holier than thou” syndrome. The status of a minority group within the larger community, zeal for missions and evangelism, emphasis on personal salvation and sanctification, stricter church discipline manifested in the exclusion of members who would not walk according to the statutes of the Scriptures as understood by the Mennonite Brethren, their refusal to recognize the forms of baptism practiced by other Mennonite groups, even though these baptisms were now based on personal redemptive experiences in contrast to the mere demand for catechetical instruction in the earlier days, all contributed to the continued tension between the Mennonite Brethren and the other Mennonites in Russia as well as in America. To this day the effects of these tensions have not been fully eradicated.

P.M. Friesen and Mennonite Brethren Self-Understanding in Faith and Practice

The statement in the Document of Secession, “We are in agreement with our dear Menno according to our convictions from the Holy Scriptures,”²⁰ implies, according to Friesen, that the causes for the separation of the

Mennonite Brethren from the larger Mennonite body were not basically theological but rather issues of life and practice. It was the tension between the confessional statement of belief and its expression in actual life that appears to have been the cause for separation. The major areas of tension appear to have been the following.:

Redemptive faith. According to Friesen, the central issue was Menno's teaching regarding redemptive faith.²¹ The secessionists asserted that the Mennonite Church had, in the early and mid-19th century, departed from Menno's understanding of faith. They expressed this belief in the following words:

All who have received faith from God, have received a tree laden with a variety of good and precious fruits. . . . The true and genuine faith acceptable in God's sight cannot remain idle, it must bring forth fruit and manifest its character. It is constantly active in love; voluntarily enters righteousness; subdues flesh and blood while crucifying the lusts and desires; finds joy in the cross of Christ; renews and gives birth to newness of life, gives life, is candid and peaceable in Christ. Behold, such a faith is a gift of God, Eph. 2:8, by which, according to the Scriptures, the righteous shall live, as Abel, Noah, Abraham, Moses, Rachel and all pious saints have done. Every good tree brings forth good fruit according to its kind. Matt. 7:17. And every tree which does not bear fruit, though it have many leaves, must be condemned and consumed by fire.²²

Friesen adds: "It is apparent that Menno was equally distant from the Roman Catholic position of works righteousness as he was from the frivolous Protestant position of salvation through faith alone without a sanctified life"²³ The central concern of the Mennonite Brethren before and after the withdrawal in 1860, according to Friesen, was conversion to God through repentance and faith in the reconciling grace in Jesus Christ and a life sanctified according to the rules of the gospel through the gift of the grace and Spirit of God.²⁴ For the purpose of clarity we quote from paragraph E of the Document of Secession dealing with this particular concern:

e) We confess a baptism on faith, as a seal of faith; not on a memorized faith, as is the practice, but on a genuine, loving faith effected by the Spirit of God. For without faith, it is impossible to please God (Hebrews 11:6). And he that hath not the Spirit of Christ, is none of His (Romans 8:9). And again our dear Saviour says to Nicodemus, John 3:3: Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God. Baptism is not the new birth, as some of the unconverted maintain, but serves as a sign for the baptismal candidate, that he is really born again.

f) Regarding holy communion we confess that it serves to strengthen the faith of true believers, for they are reminded of their mighty salvation through the death of the Lord Jesus. Yes, it is a sign that they stand in very intimate union with Jesus, their Saviour. I Cor. 10:16. Furthermore, it serves as a sign of the covenant and fellowship of believers with one another (v. 17), and not as a sign of the fellowship of believers and unbelievers with one another, as it is presently practiced. This is likewise stated in Menno Simons' *Foundation of Christian Doctrine*, Vol. I, pp. 115-121. Page 121 reads: 'If someone errs in doctrine and faith, and walks in the flesh, he can in no case be permitted to fellowship with the godfearing and repentant. . . ' In I Cor. 5:11 the Apostle Paul states: If any man that is called a brother be a fornicator, or covetous, or an idolater, or a railer, or a drunkard, or an extortioner; with such an one we are not even to eat. How much less partake of holy communion with him? Unfortunately, there are many covetous, drunkards and blasphemers with whom one shares the Lord's Supper, for not only those are drunkards who are almost continually under the influence of liquor, but also those who occasionally gorge themselves with food and drink at markets and taverns. I. Cor. 10:20-21 says 'that the things which the Gentiles sacrifice, they sacrifice to devils.' Likewise also, those who walk in the flesh cannot glorify God in the communion, because they do not know Him, but as usual they serve the devil herewith, for no man can serve two masters. Matthew 6:24. Now the apostle did not want the believers to have fellowship with the devil and the idolater

who serves the devil, and thus become one body, I Cor. 10:17.²⁵

From the above it is clear that the secessionists could not accept a mere profession of faith without the evidences of a spiritual transformation through the new birth. The years of persecution endured at the hand of the mother church following January 1860 provided the proving grounds where the faith of the Mennonite Brethren was tested.²⁶

The reaction of the Mennonite Brethren to the memorization of the catechism—as the only condition for baptism—“We confess a baptism of faith as a seal of faith: not as a memorized faith as it is practices”²⁷—resulted in the adoption of an examination process for baptismal candidates in which the corporate body of a congregation participated. The candidate was required to relate his personal experience of the new birth, to establish the change in character and relationship that had taken place in his life, and covenant to live a life consistent with the character of a new creature in Christ. In addition to the personal testimony of the candidate, testimonies from members of his family, from friends, co-workers in places of employment, and professional associates were required. Such testimonies were not limited to people within the church community, but were also solicited from those who made no Christian profession yet had close association with the candidate. The issue—is the candidate “a new creature in Christ?”—was the crucial concern. Profession and life were to be demonstrated as being consistent.

The emphasis on faith and salvation as a prerequisite to receiving the benefits of Christ's redemption as opposed to no, or only a limited, emphasis on the fruits of being a new creature, or to walk in the newness of life (Rom. 6:4), is a major point of reorientation for Mennonite Brethren as well as the Mennonite community at large. The responsibility for the life that followed the profession of salvation became a very crucial issue in the relationship of the Mennonite Brethren to the Mennonite Church as well as a focal point in the question of the church's responsibility for the walk of its members. The practice of church discipline followed as a natural result of this responsibility.

Community discipline. The belief that redemption finds expression in a new life style placed a responsibility upon the church as a corporate community to guard its testimony and to discipline those whose walk did not conform to its understanding of the standards set by the Scriptures. The Document of Secession gives a rather clear expression to this responsibility.

Regarding the ban we confess that all carnal and reprobate sinners must be banned from the fellowship of believers as Paul states in II Thess. 3:14-15. In the event that someone falls into carnal sin (God save us from it), and the Spirit of Christ, who alone can work through repentance, convicts him of his sin, so that he confesses and repents; in that case, the church has no authority to ban such a repentant sinner, because the forgiveness of sin is not obtained in or through the ban, but by the merit of Jesus Christ. This was also Menno's conviction, as recorded in Vol. 3, pages 334 and 335. However, an unrepentant sinner may not be accepted into the fellowship of believers until he be genuinely converted to Christ.²⁸

Johann Harder, elder of the Mennonite church in Ohrloff, in his letter to the Molotschna Mennonite area administrative office, dated March 29, 1860, pleads for the right of the Mennonite Brethren to exist as a separate fellowship in the larger Mennonite community. At the same time, he underlines the commitment of the Brethren to a responsible disciplining of their church members in contrast to the absence of such discipline in the Mennonite Church of which he was a member.²⁹

Dobbert, a Lutheran pastor from Prischib, responding to the division among the Mennonites in a document dated July, 1864, pointed to the legitimacy of the Mennonite Brethren cause. Theirs, he said, was a call for discipline within the church, a discipline absent in the mother church. "Claassen," he continued, "as was the case amongst his followers, did not enter the battle with carnal weapons. He had openly announced and lamented the collapse of church discipline—the Achilles heel of the church—insisting that it be practiced again."³⁰ Friesen contends that the need for a consistent lifestyle as the testimony of true salvation felt by

many attracted more and more people who sympathized with this goal from the congregations of the mother church to associate themselves with the newly established Mennonite Brethren fellowship.³¹ The emphasis on integrity of character and being which conformed with the witness of a redeemed life must be recognized as the major ingredient of an effective evangelism and growth during the first quarter century after 1860. The parallel to Acts 2:47 is apparent: "They were praising God and having favor with all people and the Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved."

This commitment to the practice of discipline within the church in the early history of the Mennonite Brethren movement (1862-64) became the redeeming element during the great crisis known as the 'Exuberant Movement' (*Die Froehliche Richtung*). Historically, this phenomenon must be viewed as a reaction to the formal, traditional, institutionalized Russian Mennonite Church of the 19th century. It therefore placed an extreme emphasis on the certainty and joy of salvation, an emphasis generally absent in the mother church. Under this influence the young M.B. Church would have faltered had it not been for the corporate discipline initiated under the leadership of Johann Claassen, an action known as the June Reform.³² Though the exercise of discipline in Mennonite Brethren practice on occasion became reactionary and later legalistic, the principle still remained a major dynamic in the life and character of the movement.

Mennonite Brethren Self-Understanding in the Ordinance of Baptism and the Fellowship of all True Believers

As an historian, Friesen does not fail to provide a broad background to the issue of the mode of baptism. The Anabaptist movement of the 16th century records variations with respect to the mode, but there is agreement that adult baptism is a seal of faith in Jesus Christ. In his reference to Menno's position, Friesen states the following:

The writings of Menno Simons in the German version that we possess are not at all clear concerning the form of baptism. While his treatment of baptism is entitled 'Von der Christlichen Taufe in dem Wasser' (concern-

ing Christian baptism in water), he also uses the expression of 'handful of water'. As far as is historically known to date, Menno apparently did not practice immersion, and moreover, like most Anabaptists of his time, was quite neutral, perhaps indifferent, in regard to this question, rigorous though he was in demanding a living faith before baptism.³³

The fact that baptism by immersion was not at first required by the Mennonite Brethren is significant. The claim of Jakob P. Becker that the understanding of baptism as an act of immersion came to the early Brethren as a result of their studies, and their determination to return to the biblical practice of baptism, and not from outside influences, is an open question.³⁴ The documented review of the process given by Friesen, indicates that historical relationships played a major part in the final adoption of immersion as the only recognized mode. In taking note of the tensions of an historical setting affecting the relationship of the mother church towards the new life movement in the fellowship of the Mennonite Brethren, one cannot escape the impression that the emphasis on immersion as the exclusively biblical form carried with it an expression of a relational rather than a purely theological character. The demand that baptism by immersion be required as a condition for participation in the Lord's Supper which followed³⁵ was used to isolate themselves from the rest and resulted in the dogmatization of a form. Friesen's plea that the M.B.'s recognize pouring and sprinkling as acceptable modes of baptism no doubt reflects the wishes of a large segment of the Mennonite Brethren fellowship after the storm of the initial years had subsided and the Brethren had gradually begun to relate more freely to the larger Mennonite community.

The far-reaching implication of the position held by the Mennonite Brethren on the issue of baptism is well-stated by Friesen:

But if we refuse communion fellowship in our 'Association' to a child of God because of our lack of understanding, then we offend a member of Christ's body. If the M.B. Church as a body cannot yet decide in favor of such fellowship at communion, one should permit it

in love and kindness to those who wish to do it in private circles according to the program given in Waldheim in May of 1903. (. . .) The duty of tolerant broth-part of 'liberated ones,' must be no less categorically and of kind indulgence of the 'aal-too-strict-ones' on the part of 'liberated ones,' must be no less categorically emphasized. We are absolutely 'free' in respect to any difference in understanding of the brother and therefore we cannot understand how anyone can be indignant when others, true to their understanding of God's commandment, cannot agree with him in spiritual matters! This is to demand freedom for themselves but to deny it to the brother and, therefore, to coerce him.³⁶

Furthermore, the Mennonite Brethren requirement that baptism by immersion be mandatory for both partners of the marriage relationship has been the occasion of endless tensions. (Members of the Mennonite Brethren Church were forbidden to marry believers from other Mennonite groups who practiced other forms of baptism.)³⁷ The demand that non-Mennonite Brethren be rebaptized by immersion as a prerequisite for marrying Mennonite Brethren members, reflects a dogmatic rigidity of which the Mennonite Brethren have been guilty in too many areas. Here and in other questions of faith and practice we may well join Friesen in his confession when he states: "the Mennonite Brethren Church could not grasp the fact—O we thick of head and narrow of heart—that not every one else was convinced that we knew it all and had nothing worthwhile to learn from anyone else."³⁸

Friesen refers to the initial years of M B history, in which this protective conservatism took root, as the "mad years during the winters of 1861-62 and 64-65." He describes some of the leaders of that era as follows: "These people never seem to harbor a thought about church history that went beyond the borders of a common Mennonite framework (although they talked of spreading their ideas throughout the whole world), nor had they ever read a serious book on theology. But they did have warm blood and healthy nerves."³⁹

The influence of this conservatism in relation to born-again believers from other evangelical fellowships, not

practicing baptism by immersion, is reflected even in the resolution of the Mennonite Brethren conference of 1963 concerning "Reception into Fellowship of Non-Immersed Believers." The restricting conditions of the resolution—in which such members were limited with regard to transfer to other fellowships within the brotherhood and disqualified from leadership requiring ordination—were necessary to protect the unity of the brotherhood. Even these restrictions were not enough to satisfy a large segment of the conference delegates, as the 120 negative votes indicate (325 voted in favor). One hundred years of history had not proven sufficient to overcome these restricting conditions in questions of baptism instituted in those early days of the Mennonite Brethren fellowship.⁴⁰

Without minimizing the effective witness which the Mennonite Brethren have had in the first 50 years of their history, we need to recognize the hindrances which their legalistic attitude toward matters of baptism and spiritual fellowship have created. The birth of the Evangelical Mennonite churches in 1905, also known as the Alliance churches in the beginning of the 20th century, testifies to this fact.

The Alliance fellowship in the Molotschna consisted of believers who came both from the Mennonite Church as well as from the Mennonite Brethren. Its statement of faith and practice was identical to that of the Mennonite Brethren, with the exception that it accepted into its fellowship truly born-again believers irrespective of the mode by which they were baptized. Yet it, like the Mennonite Brethren, also adhered to baptism by immersion.⁴¹

The Altonau Evangelical Mennonite Church at Sagra-dovka, established in December of 1907, grew out of another formal withdrawal from the Mennonite Church—a repetition of 1860—occasioned by the identical concern about the conditions within the church. The historic significance of their action warrants that we quote part of their statement of secession:

Franz Martens, the elder of this fellowship, writes the following concerning its origins. (. . .) Already for some years the majority of the ministers of the Nikolaifeld Mennonite Church of Sgradovka shared the under-

standing and conviction that our Mennonite churches had, in many points, departed from our confession of faith (and especially from God's Word), and that there was a need for a serious and thorough reform in respect to the administration of baptism, the Lord's Supper, and evangelical church discipline. Those ministers who longed for spiritual life in the church had for many years already pointed to the abuses and had pressed for reform in order that our church practices would conform with the teaching and confession handed down to us by our forefathers. . . . Is this not the main reason why in the last forty years most [?] of those who have been awakened to a new life have left the Mennonite churches? Does not the Mennonite Brethren Church in its Confession [1900-02] stress; 'that their organization does not annul the Confession of Faith of other Anabaptist Mennonites in Russia, but that they protest against the church practices of these churches'? ⁴²

All preaching and writing against separation remained ineffectual since the Bible, under certain circumstances, commands separation (II Cor. 6:14ff). Elder Martens, in an aside to the mother church, continued:

The fault, that our congregations have reached their present condition, does not lie only with the present generation; however, it is everyone's duty, and especially that of the elder, to discern and obey what the Lord says to the churches. From my point of view, it was both timely and appropriate, that a brother challenged all the spiritual leaders of the Mennonite churches in 1905 at the General Conference at Memrik, with a sermon that reviewed Christ's message to the church at Sardis (Rev. 3:1-6), to consider the question: 'What must happen in order to bring about change in our churches?'

. . . . Our determined decision is to defend the practice of believer's baptism, the Lord's Supper for believers, and apostolic church discipline, as taught by Scripture and Menno Simons, and as stressed in our own Confession of Faith. At the same time, it is our heart's desire and prayer to God that He would give us grace, in order that those who differ from us on this matter would not

feel grieved by our decision and actions. However, in order to be able to cultivate an unhindered fellowship with all those who are in agreement with us without being put in the position of having to violate the old congregational rules, we have come to the conclusion that, should the Lord lead us to unite into one fellowship, we will not neglect to notify the church and the respective local officials of our decision. . . .⁴³

On May 15th, 1907, the Evangelical Mennonite Church in Altonau was formally established under the leadership of elder Franz Martens. In 1908 one out of every five church members of the Mennonites in Russia was a Mennonite Brethren (7,000 members). The adherents, however, numbered between 16,000 and 17,000.⁴⁴ The demand that those who transferred from the Mennonite Church to the Mennonite Brethren be rebaptized, prevented many people, who were dissatisfied with the Mennonite Church, from formally identifying themselves with the Mennonite Brethren. The birth of the Evangelical Mennonite churches met a need not being met by the Mennonite Brethren.

Mennonite Brethren Self-Understanding in the Context of the Broader Mennonite Community

P.M. Friesen, as we remarked earlier, views the Mennonite Brethren and the Mennonite Church within a broad historical context. "Both are really inseparable parts of one collective organism," he remarks.⁴⁵ His personal evaluation of the events of 1860 in this perspective must be taken into consideration in attempting to arrive at a Mennonite Brethren self-understanding. His evaluation of the origin of the M.B. Church in relation to the Mennonites in Russia at large, is contained in the following paragraph, which I quote in full:

2. The author wishes at the outset to present his judgment with regard to the origin of the M.B. Church reached on the basis of the material, personal recollections and diligent inquiry from the 'older generation.'
- a) The organization of a separate 'M B Church,' based on the Scriptures and the most essential ideas of Menno, given the secularized state of the largest part

of the Russian Mennonites and the inability and partial reluctance of the church councils generally to oppose the corruption, was necessary and proved to be salutary for all of the Russian Mennonites. Generally speaking, however, the founders of the M B Church were neither intellectually nor spiritually well enough prepared for the task: several of the co-founders were decidedly incompetent and were exposed by the subsequent events graciously directed by God; others left of their own accord; still others repented of their mistakes and sins, in the same way in which the whole M B Church now and then has openly confessed and condemned its errors (cf. *Confession of Faith*, 1900/1902, 'Explanation'),—remaining in the church with modest positions brought on by the errors they had committed. But even some of the better elements, through the fault of individuals who sinned, lost faith in the goodness of the cause and could not again, whether through their own fault or that of the church, be reconciled to it. But to the upright and those who humbled themselves a merciful God granted much grace that through them, as through 'broken rods,' a situation has arisen where we today have the honor and the duty to co-operate in the work that benefits the entire Mennonite confessional fellowship in Russia and America, and to participate in building God's kingdom generally. But all of those amongst us who sense our inadequacy (it is to be hoped that the great majority of the M B Church belongs to this group), say with heartfelt sincerity: Not unto us, O Lord, not unto us, but unto Thy name be glory! ⁴⁶

In the summaries of his historical observations, Friesen quotes a leading brother, a very respected personality in both church groups, who had, as a mature person and a serious Christian, left the Mennonite Church and gone over to the Mennonite Brethren Church at that time, some 25 years earlier. His testimony is as follows:

. . . While he was fully convinced of the necessity for the establishment of the M B Church and while his joining with it was an act of obedience in agreement with his clear personal understanding taken for his own spiritual safety and growth, he nevertheless found that

that the spiritual life among our Russian Mennonites developed differently than he had at first envisioned. The spiritual growth and improvement, as far as he knows it, is relatively stronger in the Mennonite Church than in the Mennonite Brethren Church with all its advantages. . . .⁴⁷

In the years between 1860 and 1910, a broad spiritual awakening had taken place within the Mennonite Church. The majority of the ministers of the church had come to a positive evangelical faith, and many churches, consisting mainly of unbelievers, would "call mainly dedicated Christians into the ministry." If someone was called who was not a true believer he would become a Christian out of fear in view of the holy responsibility he was to assume.⁴⁸

The revival of the New Testament emphasis on the personal experience of salvation or "new birth," a responsible consistent testimony of life, a fellowship concept of the church and a sense of responsibility for carrying out the Great Commission, gradually permeated the larger Mennonite community, renewing it in the process. Harold Bender, the well-known Mennonite historian, confirmed the above observation on the occasion of the celebration of the M B Centennial in Winnipeg. There he asserted that the spiritual revivals which had entered the Mennonite community through the pietistic influence exerted on the Mennonite Brethren needed to be recognized as a major influence in turning the Mennonitism of Russia and America away from an ethnic cultural or religious institutionalism to an emphasis on the message and character of the early Anabaptists of the 16th century.⁴⁹ The expansion of the Mennonite Brethren between 1860 and 1910 in Russia, and the growth of the fellowship in North America (1874-1924) before the large influx of Mennonites from Russia (1924-1930), confirms their evangelical influence in the wider Mennonite community. The zeal for evangelism and missions beyond the frontiers of their ethnically related communities became an example for other Mennonite groups, to which they responded as new life came to them through spiritual renewal. Friesen describes the M B Church as indisputably one of the progressive churches which gave strong expression to its inner experiences. He

points to many of its members who became prominent as spiritual and intellectual leaders in the Mennonite society.⁵⁰

In contrast to the broad spiritual contributions made by the Mennonite Brethren, Friesen laments that the "growth in grace has been relatively slower in the M B Church than in the older Mennonite group."⁵¹ He believes that the main error of the M B Church "in relation to the grace received is a lack of humility and unsparing self-judgment, as well as a certain reluctance to acknowledge the good aspects, both old and new, in the Mennonite Churches."⁵² He further laments that church discipline and the walk of many members of the M B fellowship do not correspond with the ideal they set forth in their Document of Secession.⁵³

Friesen's description of the strengths and weaknesses of the M B fellowship at the close of the first half-century of its existence are confirmed in a self-evaluative statement written by the late B.B. Janz in a document entitled: "Grundzuege im Charakter der Glaubensstellung unserer Vaeter", which was read in Winnipeg, Manitoba, on the occasion of a study conference in 1956.⁵⁴ In his judgment, the weaknesses which have impaired the relationship of the Mennonite Brethren within the broader Mennonite community are: their legalism, their insistence on making baptism by immersion the 'hallmark' of truth (*Schlagbaum gegen andere Glaeubige*), and their strong insistence that their understanding of the Scriptures was final truth. They had not learned, he said, to say 'this is how I understand it to be written,' and to recognize that the understanding of others might also be valid. These traits gave the Mennonite Brethren the character of a "narrow brother."⁵⁵

As we view ourselves in the context of our history as interpreted for us by one of our early forefathers, we cannot but recognize, with humility, God's grace, mercy and patience.

Observations

The investment of a large part of my time and energy during the past three years to guide the process of the translation and publication of P.M. Friesen has created some areas of tension within me. As I view our present situation in the light of the past, I am forced to address

myself to some basic issues which provided the foundation stones in the birth and life of the early M.B. Church. Permit me to release some of the tensions by sharing a few observations which have emerged in this process.

1. The struggle for the preservation of our ecclesiastical and educational institutions can have a blinding effect upon our understanding of the character and purpose of a spiritual calling and mission. Anabaptism was born out of a struggle to regain the freedom to experience the marvels of redemptive grace in a personal relationship to Christ as Saviour and Lord. It was a cry to return to the Bible as the authority for faith and life in a liberation from the bondage of sin, to regain the joy of salvation and be freed from the politically dominated structure of the Roman Church. The history of the Mennonite movement records many such struggles between 1525 and 1860 (Holland, Prussia). Our focus, however, is on the question of our self-understanding as an M B fellowship in the present.

The struggle for the preservation of our institutions, which may have lost the original character and mission that gave birth to them, can pretend a holy zeal for a great and righteous cause, while not recognizing the carnal pursuits for self-preservation. Institutions developed to serve as a spiritual vision may claim to be the continued stewards of such a vision and use that claim to justify their existence while operating contrary to the very essence of their original purpose. Political manipulation, formation of power blocks, provincial desires to retain the advantages of existing institutions and positions are the symptoms of the destructive disease of a once spiritual fellowship. To what degree do the present struggles on behalf of local churches and educational institutions within the M.B. Conference indicate the presence of such processes of spiritual decline?

2. The basic issues in the birth of the Mennonite Brethren movement were the struggle for a redemptive faith—a new birth— and a transformed life in contrast to a form either prescribed or generally practiced in a social order without the evidences of a new life. The Mennonite Brethren in Russia distinguished between genuine conversion—evidenced by a sanctified life at great cost— and a religious profession which accommodated itself to the

cultural and political realities for social and economic advantages. The discipleship of our early brethren in the 19th century, on the other hand, brought with it radical tension with the culture of their day at great economic and social cost. Have the Mennonite Brethren in America found a way to cope with the secular culture in an affluent society without radical tension? Have they found a gospel which benefits them, assuring them of the good life? Do we hope for heaven in the beyond while practicing full identification with the culture now? Do we opt for the gospel of great benefit for 'nothing,' a gospel that brings peace of mind without calling us to be a peculiar people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation which is to show forth the *virtues* of Him who has called them out of darkness into a new life?

3. For the early M.B. Church, discipline brought with it spiritual interresponsibility. Discipleship, as understood by Hans Denk, entailed a corporate responsibility to guard the testimony of the Christ whose name the Christians bore. In some localities, however, concern for the testimony of the church led to legalism, and was applied more to selective standards of social behaviour used to punish those who violated the adopted patterns. But such negative 'punishment' in place of 'redemptive discipline' tended to become an irritant.

On the other hand, an American culture based on the cult of rugged individualism has produced a faith which claims the redemptive benefits of personal salvation without any responsibility for a consistent walk as a member of the corporate body of the church. The Mennonite Brethren fellowship of today does not believe in individual responsibility without a corporate interresponsibility for life and walk. Thus another foundation stone of the 19th century Mennonite Brethren Church seems to have been eroded.

P.M. Friesen describes vividly the tensions which beset our early brethren in questions of baptism and fellowship with believers—who differed from them in their understanding of forms and practices. He speaks of the 'all too strict ones'—isolationists—in tension with the 'liberal ones' who were open to love and recognized their need for fellowship with those who may have differed from them in their

understanding. "We cannot understand," he says, "how anyone can be indignant when others, true to their understanding of God's Word, cannot agree with him in spiritual matters. This is to demand freedom for themselves but to deny it to the brother and therefore coerce him." Does P.M. Friesen here speak only to the brotherhood of 1860-1910, or does he also speak to the tensions in the Mennonite Brethren fellowship related to the present dialogue on inspiration and eschatology? Do the important signposts of our past history have anything to say to the brotherhood today?

P.M. Friesen's call to the people of his day for humility and repentance offers us a very important point of reference for our self-understanding and possible reorientation in 1978.

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FOOTNOTES

- 1 Paul Toews, ed., *Pilgrims and Strangers: Essays in Mennonite Brethren History* (Fresno, California, 1977).
- 2 F.C. Peters, "Quo Vadis, M.B. Church," *Christian Leader* (Sept. 9, 1969); Peter J. Klassen, "Mennonite Brethren: Baptists or Mennonites," unpublished manuscript presented at the Mennonite Graduate Fellowship Seminar, 1964; Waldo Hiebert, "Who are the Mennonite Brethren?" *Chrisitan Leader* (Sept. 13, 1966); J.A. Toews, "In Search of Identity," *Mennonite Brethren Herald* (March 10, 1972); Elmer and Phyllis Martens, "Mennonite Brethren: Does the Name Fit?" *Christian Leader* (August 10, 1971). These are only a select few of many.
- 3 Royal Bank of Canada, Monthly Letter, Vol. 58, #3, March, 1977.
- 4 P.M. Friesen, *The Mennonite Brotherhood in Russia (1789-1910)*, J.B. Toews, Abraham Friesen, Peter J. Klassen and Harry Loewen, Translation and Editorial Committee (Winnipeg, 1978), Author's Preface, pp. xxvii-xxxiii.
- 5 *Ibid.*, pp. 201-574.
- 6 *Ibid.*, pp. 1-3. For additional references, see Chapter I-V.
- 7 *Ibid.*, pp. 230-232.
- 8 *Ibid.*, pp. 15-18.
- 9 *Ibid.*, pp. 230-262.
- 10 *Ibid.*, pp. 92-109.
- 11 *Ibid.*, pp. 93-95.
- 12 *Ibid.*, pp. 92-108.
- 13 *Ibid.*
- 14 *Ibid.*
- 15 *Ibid.*, p. 232.
- 16 *Ibid.*, pp. 241-253.
- 17 *Ibid.*, pp. 233-253.
- 18 A.H. Unruh, *Geschichte der Mennoniten Bruederge-meinde*, (Winnipeg, 1954), pp. 286-308.

- 19 *Ibid.*, pp. 248-250.
- 20 Friesen, *Mennonite Brotherhood*, pp. 230-232.
- 21 *Ibid.*, p. 16.
- 22 *Ibid.*
- 23 *Ibid.*, p. 17.
- 24 *Ibid.*, p. 261.
- 25 *Ibid.*, p. 231.
- 26 *Ibid.*, pp. 244-246. See also Jacob P. Bekker, *Origin of the Mennonite Brethren Church*, trans. by D.E. Pauls and A.E. Janzen, (Hillsboro, Kansas, 1973), pp. 96 ff.
- 27 Friesen, *Mennonite Brotherhood*, p. 231.
- 28 *Ibid.*, p. 252.
- 29 *Ibid.*, p. 241.
- 30 *Ibid.*, pp. 384-387.
- 31 *Ibid.*, p. 347.
- 32 *Ibid.*, pp. 416-441.
- 33 *Ibid.*, pp. 284-311.
- 34 Bekker, *Origin*, pp. 178-182.
- 35 Friesen, *Mennonite Brotherhood*. pp. 290-291.
- 36 *Ibid.*, pp. 302-303.
- 37 *Ibid.*, pp. 303-305.
- 38 *Ibid.*, p. 456.
- 39 *Ibid.*, p. 457.
- 40 Conference Book, 1963.
- 41 Friesen, *Mennonite Brotherhood*, pp. 920-921.
- 42 *Ibid.*, pp. 921-923.
- 43 *Ibid.*, pp. 922-923.
- 44 *Ibid.*, p. 926.
- 45 *Ibid.*, p. 572.
- 46 *Ibid.*, p. 202.
- 47 *Ibid.*, p. 975.
- 48 *Ibid.*, pp. 975-976.
- 49 Harold S. Bender, recorded sermon; F.C. Peters, Waterloo.
- 50 Friesen, *Mennonite Brotherhood*, p. 977.
- 51 *Ibid.*, p. 977.

52 *Ibid.*, p. 975.

53 *Ibid.*

54 B.B. Janz, Study Conference paper, Winnipeg, 1956.
Copy in the Center for Mennonite Brethren Studies,
Fresno, California.

55 *Ibid.*